The Soul Thinking Itself: Toward a Poetics of Subjectivity in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis argues for a phenomenological reading of Dickinson’s poetics of subjectivity, ranging from perception to self-consciousness. Dickinson’s poetics is phenomenological in the sense that her poetry explores and enacts the subtle and complex experience of a subject that can never grasp itself fully. In this exploration, the Hegelian dialectical movement from sense-certainty to self-consciousness and spirit is a useful auxiliary lens for understanding Dickinson, but this lens has to include, among other things, the Christian and pagan (Neoplatonic) ethical, philosophical and mystical traditions (as in Emerson’s Essays) for a more well-rounded picture of Dickinson’s poetry.

Chapter 2 examines the dialectical doubleness of perception, pervaded by pain, lack of closure and liable to distortion, an experience constitutive of subjectivity. Chapter 3 explores the ineradicable experiences of absence, desire, blank and negation that not only frame Dickinson’s poetry but constitute, even threaten to eclipse, the perceiving subject. Chapter 4 focuses on the movement from consciousness to self-consciousness, never that
of a pure subjective rationality, but integrally inclusive of feeling to the point of
unhappiness—a self-consciousness or developing subjectivity caught between the
opposed and apparently irreconcilable poles of its experience of self and otherness.
Chapter 5 analyses Dickinson’s characteristic “slants,” flashes of light, and oblique
angles, all of which profoundly disorient, and cross the dialectical interval of, subjectivity,
reasserting the existence of two poles bound together in both identity and difference. It
then goes on to probe not only how the interval emerges but what this space is for
emergent subjectivity occurring within and traversing it. Finally, Chapter 6 takes up the
broader task of situating the notion of a soul within the mediating perspectives of
consciousness, perception, mind, and self-replicating spirit first, to determine what soul
and its functions might be and, second, to analyze the qualities of its self-limitation. In
removing its own preferences and limiting or adjusting its field of interactions, the
subject appears both to recapitulate, yet complete what were at earlier stages simply
painful, seemingly passive moments of absence, blankness, and blindness.
Each chapter identifies an important layer of Dickinson’s poetics from perception to the
fuller range of subjectivity and emphasizes both the negative and the positive sides of her
poetics. The thesis suggests that in Dickinson we encounter a new poetics of subjectivity,
one in which many earlier features of consciousness such as body, soul, mind, spirit, the
“I”, the “me,” the “we,” and even consciousness itself, are subsumed and transformed in
what is effectively a very Dickinsonian phenomenology of subjectivity.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Major Theses

My way of reading Emily Dickinson is neither conventional nor entirely novel. I read her in this thesis not simply as a direct reflection of Puritanism or as a victim of the restrictive aspects of feminine culture in the New England of her time, or as reacting against the strict laws governing even the domestic sphere in her own family, but rather as a meditative thinker who through the medium of poetry uncovers and thinks through unsolved problems of selfhood that are much more universal in their scope than is normally recognized.

First, if Emily Dickinson can be said to be concerned with the self and its constituent elements, what can we say about how this self is structured and how it functions? Many poems directly engage terms which carefully distinguish between constituent elements of human existence—“being,” “perception,” “consciousness,” “soul.” It is necessary to show first what patterns emerge in her way of representing selfhood or subjectivity in part or as a whole. I argue that a careful reader of a significant portion of Emily Dickinson’s poetry can discern within it a poetics of subjectivity, a poetics created organically as the poet participates in a working-out of the internal processes of a self-articulating subject. As an art form, Dickinson’s poetry approaches, perhaps more than that of any other poet, a mode of expression akin to what Hegel considers the highest form of art, one through which “the idea is made available to consciousness. . . one of the modes by which absolute spirit comes to consciousness of
itself,”¹ a mode similar to religion and philosophy, though offering not the same degree of closure or satisfaction to the self. I propose that in these poems, the reader witnesses “the soul thinking itself” (Hegel). This process is one in which the reader is implicitly invited to partake, because of its fluidity, and its being-in-process, even as it sometimes results in existential entrapment, both for speaker and reader. Many critics quote Dickinson’s claim in her letter to Higginson that the dramas unfolded in her poems represent those of differently situated “supposed person[s],” not of herself.² Why any critic, especially those who rarely take anything at face value, would hold such a claim in sacred regard is startling, to say the least. Even if it were to be true, we would still be left to struggle with what such a claim could mean, and what kinds of limitations are built into the very fabric of a poetry that bears the mark of philosophical meditation. In contrast, Helen Vendler is interested in Dickinson’s poetry as thoughts-in-process, reflecting the very essence of thought as it actually occurs³; she therefore rejects the view that her poetry as a whole is constructed as a series of goal-oriented “performances.” As Vendler indicates, traditional theorists did not see the poem “principally as a work bent on following the lead of a law of aesthetic thinking, a work mimicking, in its motions, distinctive mental operations characteristic of its author⁴, but this is indeed what is


³ For a similar view see also Roland Hagenbühle, “Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process,” in Turning Points in the History of Poetic Knowledge: Papers from the International Poetry Symposium (Regensburg, Germany: F. Pustet, 1983), 138: “Dickinson, therefore, no longer aims at mimetic representation or self-expression (in terms of romantic feelings); instead, it is her tactics to throw into relief the mechanism of the knowing process itself. . .”

required in understanding some of Dickinson’s best work. She suggests, further, that Dickinson’s often maddeningly disrupted temporal sequences constitute the poet’s honest representation of “her developing perception of what life’s ‘plots’ have actually turned out to be.” Although I agree with Vendler’s basic premise that Dickinson engages a “fluid view of lyric,” I go beyond Vendler to identify those “distinctive mental operations” and situate them within a particular tradition or traditions of thinking, including German Idealism and Romanticism (especially Hegel); the Platonism and Neoplatonism that exist as significant precursors of these traditions; and some aspects of the Christian ascetic and virtue traditions. It may be argued that Dickinson’s “philosophical” poetry is a direct complement to or unpacking of the psychological implications of such traditions.

Second, I also argue that Dickinson’s poetry reveals a characteristic pattern of dialectical thinking which in its individual phases is often negative or apophatic. By apophatic, I mean not simply the kind of radical negation of language that William Franke proposes, because Dickinson’s apophasis is more complex and includes both affirmative and negative elements in an overall pattern that never allows affirmation, negation, or negation of negation to be final. Further, I suggest, as does Vendler, that the

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5 Vendler, Poets Thinking, 7-8.

6 Helen Regueiro Elam concludes differently (in “Dickinson and the Haunting of Self,” in The American Sublime, ed. Mary Arensberg (NY: State University of New York Press, 1986)): “The sublime for [Dickinson] is always a negative moment, a moment of crisis in which the voicing is a ‘seeing’ into the dark—a triumph over the darkness that threatens to engulf it, but also an unveiling of the very silence out of which it constitutes itself” (98). Regueiro seems a little conflicted about her own claim in acknowledging both the positive and (seemingly) negative aspects of this movement. Although I do not specifically engage the notion of the sublime in this dissertation, I would argue that Dickinson’s sublime probably has much more scope than this critic recognizes.

poems are most productively conceived not as individual performances or discrete units, but as phases in the discernment of a thought because they bear a discernible "psychological continuity" insofar as they visit and revisit the expression of mental processes. I also argue in this regard that certain aspects of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* are most useful as a heuristic means of “opening up” some of her poems, and particularly Hegel’s dialectic of the self.\(^8\) I take as one of my avenues of exploration in this respect the approach of Evan Carton: “Hegel describes this form of self-consciousness, the form that most suggestively characterizes the American writers and

\(^8\) Other critics have rejected out of hand the usefulness of a Hegelian perspective in reading Dickinson’s poetry: Richard E. Brantley (Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson (NY: Palgrave Macmillan) 2004), in identifying a “natural/spiritual dialectic” (9) at work in Dickinson’s poetry argues that Dickinson’s imagination is fundamentally Late-Romantic and asserts: “...the solipsism of Hegel’s spiritual synthesis rises above her level of self-consciousness. With thoroughgoing idealism, Hegel’s Speculative Idea, or Absolute Knowledge, or ‘spirit knowing itself as spirit’ devalues the role of the world in human development” (7). What Brantley fails to acknowledge is the extent to which Hegelianism is infused with the Platonism and Neo-Platonism (and even Christian sensibility) that also informs Emerson (who he does suggest resonates with Dickinson). Further, while I agree with Brantley that Hegelianism is too totalizing to account for the whole of Dickinson’s thought and imagination (even for her view of spirit/soul), I argue that it can act as an excellent intertext for a reader interested in those poems of Dickinson’s bearing a phenomenological imprint and which have that Hegelian character that looks solipsistic, marked as it is by the inversions, conversions, and doublings of self.

Fred D. White (“Emily Dickinson’s existential dramas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2002) also dismisses Hegel in favor of Kierkegaard as an aid to understanding what he calls Dickinson’s “existentialist sensibility”: “Kierkegaard refutes Hegel’s universal synthesis because it ignores reality at the individual level.” White apparently justifies this view by referring to the fact that the speakers of Dickinson’s poems “seldom feel secure in the promise of—or refuse to take refuge in—a transcendent reality” (94-5). I disagree with White’s implied assessment of Hegel here, as Hegel’s self-constituting subject is rarely in any state of comfort, existential or otherwise.

James E. von der Heydt (At the Brink of Infinity: Poetic Humility in Boundless American Space (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), in contrast, perceives a resonance between Dickinson and one aspect of Hegelian thought: “At a time when the promise of the future, and new vistas in science, had begun to increase the appeal of Hegelian thought, with its flair for seeing vectors in history, Dickinson eschewed dynamism. She declined a philosophy of accomplishment. She invites us to focus stubbornly on the second half of Hegel’s remarkable sentence: ‘History in general is...the development of Spirit in Time, as Nature is the development of the Idea in Space...’ Dickinson occupies herself wholly with understanding its [that second clause’s] possibilities” (84-5). Clearly, this does not represent all of Hegel’s thought, and is not all he has to say about the subject or about the artist. Hegel is not only here to provide “literary criticism with a crucial antidote to the regrettable ahistorical bellettrism of previous generations,” Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* need not be read only in a historical sense (i.e., as articulating subjectivity through transpersonal history), but can be read as a drama of an individual subject, in which sense it has a *personally* historical character, whatever this could be said to mean within and through consciousness and other faculties of the subject.
texts that I would affiliate with romance, as ‘one which knows that it is the dual
consciousness of itself, as self-liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical, and as self-
bewildering and self-perverting, [one which] is the awareness of this self-contradictory
nature of itself.’”9 Such a notion was certainly in the air Dickinson breathed. Emerson
himself was certainly no stranger to the notion of dialectic. In fact, in his essay
“Intellect,” he marks it as the pattern necessary to anyone who would respect the “highest
law of his being”:

He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself
aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dog-
matism, and recognize all the opposite negations, between which,
as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconvenience of
suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth . . .10

Third, in my view, Dickinson’s thinking is also organically negative—that is, it
often begins with gaps, absences, and voids in the process of construing the patterns
which give form to her perceptions. In one respect, this may represent what Keats might
have meant by “negative capability,” namely, the ability of the gifted artist to create a
blank space or receptive emptiness within the self as a template for the birth or
emergence of new forms. On the other hand, her thinking, while in tune with this, seems
to go beyond it, since she constantly recognises the necessity of absence as a
psychological counterpoint to the affirmation of concrete reality. Thus, at the root of her

9 Evan Carton, The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe,
and Whitman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 126.

10 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Intellect” in The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. II.: Essays:
202.
negative thinking is a dialectic through which an absence becomes a presence, which becomes, subsequently, yet another absence, one more stark and profoundly realized than the initial one, but which nonetheless provides contours to the void of absence itself.

Further, it is at the root of Dickinson’s negative thinking, that we find not only a dialectical consideration of absence and presence, infinitude and finitude, minuteness and grossness, life and death, boundary and boundarilessness, one and many; but also a doubleness of identity (not simply duality traditionally conceived) lying at the root of self. This is a potentially self-correcting duplicity, but it is also a doubleness that tends toward self-cancelling and, at worst, effacement of a recognizable self or subject.

Fourth, contrary to most criticism that proposes that the poet’s fear of dissolution is driven primarily by external forces, I propose that the strictures of particular domains—of religion, sex, and home—upon Dickinson fail adequately to account for her deep and abiding concern for the most intimate aspects of the generation, existence, and continuity of the self—perception, consciousness, and soul. I do not deny that there are many poems which deal specifically with the pressures on the speaker of “table life,” specific religious doctrine, and particular cultural norms concerning marriage, the expression of love, and the duties of women. However, what we find in these poems, much more so than in the great majority of those poems with which I am concerned, is a rhetorical playfulness and tone of subversion that demonstrates a different level of mastery that can be seen as perhaps little more than a conjuror slipping the bonds. These poems are nonetheless serious, but what they show is the degree to which the poet could

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11 By external forces, I mean the soul-cramping Puritanism that had settled heavily in the Concord Valley even as most of New England had lifted itself into a less restrictive Unitarianism; the restrictive aspects of feminine culture in the New England of the mid to late 1800's; and the strict laws governing even the domestic sphere in her own family.
demonstrate when she wanted a mastery of her external world through language itself, in a way that we could legitimately consider to be genuinely Emersonian. Such poems are often consciously self-reflexive, even metapoetic, reducing the friction of the burrs of external reality to mere language. They show that any order based largely upon a symbolic system derived from language itself can easily be dissolved into its own web of referentiality.

In sum, I will argue that in the process of visiting and revisiting certain psychological or philosophical themes, from an internal psychological perspective in which the consciousness becomes at times “trapped” in its own processes, Emily Dickinson allows the reader to discern the development of a poetics of subjectivity that will be qualified in terms which I will outline more clearly in my outline of the specific content of chapters which will be provided later in this introductory chapter. Arguably, the question of selfhood or subjectivity is at some level delineated in every poem a poet writes. However, in the case of Dickinson, this reader is led to consider with greater care those poems which communicate themselves as records of internal subjective experience, not merely as rhetorical performances which rehearse a field of possibilities or which dramatise externally experienced conflicts or ecstasies (indeed, some of these will fall under the purview of my thesis, but usually for the sake of illuminating ideas central to discerning Dickinson’s framing of selfhood). My reader may accuse me of assuming a great deal in assigning to the great majority of the poems I study in this thesis a designation of “record of subjective experience,” but I think that the tone of these poems, as well as their subject matter, will communicate my rationale for judgment to the reader.
Review of Secondary Literature Relevant to Thesis Methodology

Although I have not yet outlined my methodology fully (this I will do in the following section), I would like to briefly turn to an examination of critical perspectives which proceed from some of the same premises as does this work, both to demonstrate that there is some general agreement about the nature of Dickinson’s poetry as I have described it, and also to clarify what is different about my thesis and my approach to the poetry.

Reading Emily Dickinson’s poetry in the manner in which I intend—that is, to discern within it patterns of thought in a self-reflexive mode—is by no means entirely novel. In earlier criticism such as that of Albert Gelpi, for instance, there is a direct concern with the problem of a dislocated consciousness in which the thinking subject sees itself as being separated from objects as through an abyss. He considers this problem, represented in both Dickinson and Emerson, as a problem manifest in thought, in an “almost exclusive [focus] on first axioms and questions in a life-long, death-long struggle.”12 Gelpi also regards language as “the substantiating means whereby poets—and through them all of us—strive toward psychological wholeness and completion.”13 Gelpi justifies, as do I, a non-chronological approach to Dickinson’s poetry in order to “pose the tensions which are the coherence of Dickinson’s work.”14

Louis Martz, writing at about the same time, argues that “the poet of Emily Dickinson’s kind cultivates the habit of self-analysis, sinks within the self to study all experience in close detail.” He goes further to identify the “essential exercise and aim of

her poetry: to join thoughts deliberately, precisely, seam by seam, until a single condition of mind, a single experience, is fully grasped, fully understood.”\textsuperscript{15} Martz’s optimism is, in my view, a little unfounded as I argue that the poet successfully demonstrates that the dialectical subject is most often implicitly refractory and unyielding, finding only exits out of or developments from dizzying oscillation into a similar state at a higher level.

More recently, Bradley Styles (2003), writing on Emerson, his contemporaries, and similarly oriented American poets of the mid-to-late 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, demonstrates that American Romantic writers as a whole were particularly concerned with the definition of selfhood or “identity” with reference to two loci for the self, one incarnational and the other anti-transcendent. He identifies the situating of selfhood or identity for particular writers as a “problem of self-location” and argues in relation to Dickinson in particular that by “reinforcing the intrinsic worth of body-consciousness experiences, Dickinson attempts to create a ‘heaven’ of sorts for her physical self-hood within her poetry.”\textsuperscript{16} Evidently, my claims will differ significantly as I suggest that Dickinson does not, and cannot, successfully separate these so-called loci of the self, the incarnational and the supposedly anti-transcendent, in order to hole up in some make-believe transcendent realm.

Helen Vendler (2004), as I have noted above, sees Dickinson’s poetry as thought-in-process and her poems individually as instances in which she revisits and reframes previously articulated ideas in order to think through a topic. Here, in my view, she is


basically arguing for a phenomenological approach, though not explicitly.

On the Hegelian side of the issue and earlier than both Styles and Vendler above, Evan Carton (1985) identifies dialectic and identity as central perspectives for understanding Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne. As I have mentioned earlier, he connects American “Romantic” writers and their texts within the purview of a Hegelian form of self-consciousness, as “one which knows that it is the dual consciousness of itself, as self-liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical, and as self-bewildering and self-perverting, [one which] is the awareness of this self-contradictory nature of itself.”\(^{17}\) On the other hand, he does not really use Hegel to explore what this may mean in particular instances, different contexts, or at different stages of the development of self-consciousness, leaving only a consideration of a general pattern or purpose. In general, detailed Hegelian approaches to Dickinson are rare, brief, and restricted to the mid-1980’s (with a few exceptions) or earlier.

Roland Hagenbüchle (1983) in his article “Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process,” identifies her poetry as a “poetry of ‘crisis,’ of turning points” and of elements of a process that Hagenbüchle argues was characteristic of American Romanticism as a whole and especially of its cultural and scientific revolutions. He even goes so far as to regard “the relation between world and mind as a dialectical one, a view reminiscent of Hegel’s famous analysis on the mutual dependency between master and slave.”\(^{18}\) I am most in tune with Hagenbüchle’s reading in so far as he argues for the ultimately positive


renovating force of negativity and what he calls a “poiesis negativa,” but I am less convinced by his overall argument that what we see in Dickinson is a “shift to metonymy” and a “turning away from traditional (and essentially metaphoric) authority,” that is, as I understand it, a shift to contiguous series of images rather than their anagogic or analytical counterparts in metaphor, since I see both metonymy and metaphor as operative in Dickinson’s poetry. On the whole, however, in analyzing the poetry, I agree with Hagenbüchle’s premise that as the last stand before the incursions of modernism, “with [Dickinson], the movement of language is still identical with the movement of consciousness (both constituting, ideally, a single reality,”¹⁹ however disturbed, distracted, refractory and consequently transformative such consciousness, in my view, may be.

In taking a Jungian approach to Romanticism, Martin Bickman (1988) sees Dickinson and her contemporaries as enacting a process of individuation, and thus the development of the psyche, through the lens of what he regards as “the Emersonian paradox” concerning self-reliance: “that the deeper one goes into oneself the closer one comes to the universal and the collective.”²⁰ As I have argued elsewhere in this introductory chapter, the weakness of Bickman’s approach is that it is far too limited to account for the various interpenetrating levels of dialectical self-constitution suggested in Dickinson’s poetry.

Philip Stambovsky (2004), in examining the “visionary work of art” as a “seminal inferential power for the philosophical imagination,” connects concepts in Hegel,

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¹⁹ Hagenbüchle, “Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process,” 146.

Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Whitehead to poets such as Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, and Keats in order to illuminate “the poetically foregrounded and philosophically pregnant routes of speculative thinking that the attunements” to their works “elicit when one probes and meditates its Werksein.” In relation to Dickinson specifically, he uses Rudolph Otto’s concept of the sensus numinis: “It is this same inner centering in the numinous that renders Dickinson’s verse particularly rich in phenomenological insights.” On the whole, this work is too theoretically dense to achieve successfully what Stambovsky hopes to evoke in the reader: an impulsion to read the poetry through his particular literary-philosophical lens. Nonetheless, my own approach sympathizes with Stambovsky’s premise that the poetry itself pushes the reader into a meditative philosophical mode of thinking that is integral to penetrating Dickinson’s deepest concerns.

Joy Ladin, in her strong article “‘this Consciousness that is aware’: The Consolation of Emily Dickinson’s Phenomenology” (2007), directly examines some of Dickinson’s “phenomenological poems—that is, the poems in which Dickinson attempts to describe the anatomy of consciousness.” Ladin takes a view similar to my own, in positing that “abstracting, generalizing effects are built into phenomenology,” sometimes making it difficult to detach, examine, and properly identify individual components of self, such as “Soul.” Ladin argues that Dickinson’s phenomenology is not one in which “soul as an analytical subject . . . can be objectively examined” but is enacted “through

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the unfolding of language.” She thus seems to suggest that in Dickinson’s phenomenology, language is in some sense both identical to consciousness, registering its insularities, doublings, and depletions; and, because it is embodied in words and a reader participates in its phenomenology, “the solipsistic circularity of any given soul becomes transparent, and each detail of its adventure—including death—becomes knowable, intelligible, shared.” Indeed, I find that in many cases, faculties of the self exposed, explored, or situated in many of Dickinson’s poems do open themselves up to yield a sense of what functions they perform.

By contrast to all of the above, James Von Der Heydt (2008), in a study of American literary preoccupation with size and boundlessness (see, e.g., preface ix-x), examines “links made directly between opposite extremes,” arguing that in these texts, Dickinson’s poems included, “no mediation can succeed and no action can begin to address the perennial longing to participate in something endless” (xii). He consequently defines Dickinson as in opposition to any Hegelian construction of consciousness and argues: “When infinity is involved . . . subject and object stand irrevocably apart: nothing can mediate the human scale and the writer’s horizons of knowledge. Infinity may be the primal human prospect; but in encounter with infinite space, writing knows only its own failure and can only gather souvenirs like seashells.”

22 Joy Ladin, “‘This Consciousness that is aware’: The Consolation of Emily Dickinson’s Phenomenology” in Wider Than the Sky: Essays and Meditations on the Healing Power of Emily Dickinson, eds. Cindy Mackenzie and Barbara Dana (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State UP, 2007), 33-6.

23 Ladin, “This Consciousness,” 38.

24 James E. Von Der Heydt, The Brink of Infinity: Poetic Humility in Boundless American Space (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), ix-xii.

25 Von der Heydt, The Brink of Infinity, 21.
Here he invokes Emerson’s essays, including *The Poet*, to situate Dickinson’s own orientation. I will clearly argue for an entirely different reading of Dickinson, as I suggest that in many of her poems mediation is implicit within consciousness at every level of its dialectical development and, indeed, even in the very relation between what is finite and its infinite character.

In the same year, Jed Deppman (2008) also focuses on Dickinson’s poetry as thoughts in process, positing that reading such poetry necessitates that we inhabit those very thoughts and travel that road with them. In this process the reader becomes implicated: Dickinson’s poems “reflect an almost orgiastic capacity to initiate, posit, or offer thought; they say something serious but succinct . . . on difficult and common problems; they step back from the personal situation and try to comment from a general perspective; and they use everything available to pursue their thought . . . The truth that emerges from reading such poems is never a fixed position but always a singular event of shared thought.”  

Again, while I am in sympathy with Deppman’s analysis, I think he oversimplifies—or perhaps he does not even try to unpack—the complexities of Dickinson’s thought about thought itself and its iconic instantiations in her poems within and against consciousness itself.

On a more general note, R.C. Allen (2007) argues that “Emily Dickinson’s primary subject is not suffering, but ego-transcendence, which is liberation from the stifling prison of the ego-self. This is her *materia poetica.*” He thus suggests that her view corresponds to a Buddhist perspective of subjectivity, a view with which, as will

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become evident in Chapter 4, I cannot be in agreement, as I argue that affect (fear, desire, pain, and pleasure) is never meaningfully sacrificed or overcome within Dickinson’s dialectics of subjectivity.

Finally, in relation to historical materialism and feminist criticism, I should briefly mention Joan Burbick, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Vivian Pollack, and Richard Wilbur. Burbick, in focusing on “pressing ideological conflicts of her social class,” identifies the necessity of a dialectical exploration of what she calls an “economy of desire” (I suggest that such a dialectical economy of desire is implicit in many of Dickinson’s poems that specifically begin with absence, but I find no credible traces of “ideological conflicts” within these, arguing instead that desire and absence are intrinsically bound by each other within Dickinson’s dialectics of subjectivity).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff takes a slightly different approach to cast light on the need to avoid an oversimplified identification of the poems’ “speakers” and their author, examining ways in which the poet deliberately blurs the lines to create “illusions of intimacy”; thus, Wolff focuses, as I do, on the construction of subjectivity in Dickinson’s poetry but at the level of intersection between the poet as historical person and the speaker as a seemingly fixed persona, whereas I tend to see Dickinson’s poems (at least the ones I take up) as probing the question of subjectivity, and as a whole locating such subjectivity simultaneously on multiple levels of self and other-referentiality.

Vivian Pollack also argues that the Dickinsonian subject is constructed through

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deprived personae that exemplify “a broad spectrum of needs: spiritual, emotional, and intellectual.” She argues that Dickinson’s poems are sites for a drama in which “sublimation of the debilitating emotions [is] occasioned by neglect or persecution . . .” (.

She refers to this as “Dickinson’s strategy of renunciation,” posed as a response to the perceived inadequacies of a Puritan, Calvinist or Transcendentalist “economy of compensation” and as a defense against “Victorian sexual politics and in part [those] within her own family.”30 She may well be right—though what might count as evidence may be unclear. My own approach to Dickinson’s important notion of renunciation frames it as redemptive on all those levels, no matter how problematic or unsettling such a notion may also be.

Finally, Richard Wilbur, like those critics who regard the necessity of seeing Dickinson’s poetry within a phenomenological framework, suggests that her poetry is “a continual appeal to experience,” arguing that “[s]he was a Linnaeus to the phenomena of her own consciousness, describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul.”31 Like Pollack, he regards Dickinson’s renunciation as an “emotional strategy” to deal with her sense of lack and the failure of the compensatory ethic of Calvinism. Although I agree with Wilbur’s overall assessment of Dickinson’s poetry as phenomenologically grounded, I think that to only place this phenomenological impulse within a “compensatory ethic” or to regard it as an “emotional strategy” is to overlook a philosophical tone which is much more often positively meditative and absorbed than it is defensive. A slightly different view of renunciation is to be found in Shira Wolosky, who


sees Dickinson’s so-called reclusion “in terms of traditions of withdrawal from the world and of her resistance to them.” She argues that this reclusion does not attest to the superiority of interiority as a “resource of meaning”; but rather it “protests the lack of design in the external world of phenomena and events, where she holds that intelligibility should (but does not) reside.”

**Why it is Productive to read Dickinson in relation to the Stages of Consciousness in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit***

As I have suggested, Hegel’s philosophy, especially as it is manifest in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can be regarded as a *psychological* model—and, in so far as it is one which marks the development of consciousness as essentially dialectical at all stages, it comprehends smaller, perhaps seemingly static and self-contained dialectics, recognizing that they are all parallel and to some degree analogous constructions within which consciousness operates (i.e., inner and outer, universal and particular, one and many, self and other, me and not-me, etc.). Although the *Phenomenology* has been read within the history of philosophy (by figures such as Marx and Engels) as a working out of the development of material, historical, and political forces rather than Spirit (or, just as likely, to some degree adopting Spirit *as* matter, history, and politics) in time—that is, beyond the experience of a single individual, to include the ages and epochs of humankind, in which case it appears as a thesis that presupposes and prefigures a political context—there is nothing within the work that suggests we should not regard Hegel as documenting the history of individual Spirit, of a maturing of the consciousness of a single individual.

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The reader of Emily Dickinson’s poetry benefits from an interaction with Hegelian thought for several reasons. First, Hegel acknowledges both implicitly and explicitly that the dialectical expansions and contractions, fadings in and out of existence—of consciousness—occur at intervals within the self, albeit at different levels, and that the Self that experiences these stages is not necessarily aware of them as stages. As Findlay, one of Hegel’s important commentators, in his foreword to the *Phenomenology*, suggests regarding the movement through sense-certainty, perception, and Understanding, “It is important to realize that the sensing, perceiving, understanding, and self-conscious mind does not perceive the logical connections which lead from each of these stages to the next. It is we, the phenomenologists, who perceive them.” As readers, we are engaged to act as the phenomenologists who would understand existence as the poet frames it. Most committed readers of Dickinson would acknowledge that this is a role they are sometimes compelled to play.

For the sake of comparison, I shall briefly examine another model of dialectic which has been applied to Dickinson and her contemporaries, and which also has a psychological character, to demonstrate why we require with Dickinson Hegel’s more expansive and comprehensive dialectical vision. Hegel’s vibrating, constantly self-displacing dialectic is unlike Jungian dialectic, which has been identified by critics such as Martin Bickman as central to the psychology of American Romanticism, in the sense that Jung acknowledges the dialectical movement of individuation, but primarily perceives it as one single, large movement with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Undoubtedly, the unity-division-reintegration paradigm of Jungian psychoanalytic criticism is relevant to the reading of American Romantic writing. I propose, however,

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that as an aid in the reading of what I call Dickinson’s “meditations on being” poems, Jungian thought cannot capture the finer turns, ascents, descents, and oscillations of the self engaged in claiming and developing consciousness. The dialectical aspect is clearly present in Dickinson—in fact, it is almost everywhere. But it bears a different face in different instances, marking in different dialectical progressions different degrees of certainty, skepticism, liberation, otherness, singularity, unity, absence, and presence. At times the self is her object, and in such a poem the traditional “speaker” dissolves before the reader’s eyes as the reader follows the thought and the result of that thought, which is sometimes the vanishing of consciousness itself. In other poems, the speaker maintains her objective stance, evaluating the paradoxes of being from a seemingly-safe vantage-point, but nonetheless taking for her subject matter the contents of her own consciousness and its processes. In both cases, the result is a meditative mode which requires analytical tools sharper than Jung’s. With Hegel we find, rather, as we do with Dickinson, a myriad of beginnings, middles, and ends that constantly solidify and dissolve in and out of each other, even as they shift forward and upward slightly with each oscillation toward the fruition of self-consciousness in Spirit.

Second, Hegel conceives of the development of consciousness as “‘thought-phases’ which negate the content of prior ones, or which bring to fulfillment or perfection what is ‘obscurely prefigured,’ or which belong as an excerpt to some larger ‘inclusive

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34 In adopting a Jungian psychoanalytic approach to Dickinson and other American Romantic writers, Bickman was responding in part to “philosophical” literary criticism which, in its focus on “philosophical problems attendant on the writing of fiction and poetry. . . just as often neglects the affective dimensions of the text” and which becomes, in the process, “emotionally flat” (Bickman, American Romantic Psychology, xiv-xv). Although Bickman was writing 20 years ago, his central criticism could well be aimed at the historicism so in vogue now and which in some cases (Dickinson’s in particular, I would argue), threatens to facilely displace questions of affect onto the plane of documentary historical events. This is only correct and necessary in so many cases and with so many writers, but it is not, I will argue, either appropriate or helpful in reading a certain portion of Dickinson’s poetry.
Hegel’s view of psychological thought is useful for reading poetry which is not narrative, lyrical, or performative in any conventional sense (by this, I mean not individual poems, but poems which seem to speak to one another, and which share a specialized language that points to processes of mind rather than of personae and cultural response). Further, this Hegelian context captures or reflects what is thematically evident in so many of Dickinson’s poems—that truths are “obscurely prefigured” for the speaker (or poet), resulting so often in moments of suspension rather than mere blockage for the mind, consciousness, or soul.

Third, Hegel conceives negation as “essential to conception and being: we can conceive nothing and have nothing if we attempt to dispense within it . . . But . . . it operates always within a unity . . . totally present in each and all of its aspects.”

I will argue that Dickinson’s poetry reveals just such a characteristic pattern of dialectical thinking which in its individual phases is primarily negative, even while it is often in a holistic sense affirmative.

Fourth, Hegel, in Findlay’s assessment, argues that “universals . . . enjoy a sunken, implicit existence in natural objects . . . and they also enjoy some sort of being beneath the surface of natural objects, as the essences or forces which explain them.” This allows for the interesting figuration of universality, at least as an image, as not merely extending upward vertically beyond nature and matter, but also downward, either as a support or foundation upon which matter rests, or, as an infinitude that stretches below it. In such a case, that to which we would normally ascribe infernality—the abyss—could

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35 Findlay, Foreword to *Phenomenology*, ix.
36 Findlay, Foreword to *Phenomenology*, ix.
37 Findlay, Foreword to *Phenomenology*, xi.
become the site merely of a true rendering of the bi-directional reinvestment of the Infinite in the Finite, but one which consciousness, not fully developed, does not understand and thus only fears. Hegel further asserts that these universals “achieve their full development and truth in the self-consciousness or Spirit, in which all universal patterns of logical and natural being are reactivated and resumed.” Dickinson’s poems clearly mark different subjective impressions of the relationship between universals and particulars—between a formal and a material aspect—but it is Hegel’s formulation that helps us to understand how it might be that a single subject could draw such different (apparent, but really provisional) conclusions about these relationships (i.e., in such poems as “Perception of an object costs”\(^\text{38}\) as compared to “The Finite/ Furnished with the Infinite” (in “The Admirations and Contempts of Time”).\(^\text{39}\)

Finally, Hegel’s thought phases themselves are framed in terms strangely and shockingly similar to those of Dickinson, adding credence to any effort to draw correspondences between Dickinson’s thought-phases and those of Hegel.

**Methodology**

For the purposes of this dissertation, I shall restrict myself for the most part to the earlier sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely, 1) Sense-Certainty in the mode of Perception, in which Hegel shows that even the most apparently real individual, *this* sense-object, is, in fact, mediated already by universality; but in this mode, the response of the subject to this emerging realization is to posit a flaw in the object of perception itself; 2) the development of consciousness into self-consciousness and the realization

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\(^{38}\) For my reading of this poem see Chapter 2.

\(^{39}\) For a discussion of this poem see Chapter 6, note 73.
that both poles of the self-conscious are themselves not objects but *self-consciousness* (this occurs in the Master-Slave dialectic and the subsequent important section on Stoicism, Skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness); here, we find the “correction” of the error of the previous section or movement in so far as the flaw of apprehension or self-apprehension is no longer simply projected externally in a naïve certainty. These are the two major sections to which I shall refer, but occasionally I will cite from other sections of the Phenomenology (e.g., Reason and Spirit) and also from other works of Hegel such as the *Logic of Science* and the later *Philosophy of Spirit*. Throughout I have attempted to make as much sense of Hegel from my own readings, but inevitably I have been aided by J.N. Findlay’s helpful summaries and commentaries (including his *Hegel: A Re-Examination*) as well as by Quentin Lauer’s commentary on the *Phenomenology*. I also rely on Johann Stallo’s pithy essay *Understanding Hegel* published in 1848, which had a strong impact on the development and integration of Hegelian thought into the American tradition. In my view, its twenty pages or so still represent one of the most accessible accounts of Hegel’s thought.

For the purpose of clarity, let me sum up two of the most important elements of my overall methodology. First, my reading of Dickinson’s poetics of subjectivity is phenomenological in the sense that her poetry seems to me to explore the subtleties and complexities of the experience of a subject that in a sense can never grasp itself fully: on such an understanding, Hegel necessarily plays a subsidiary role. I want to read Dickinson as much as possible on her own terms, and only partly through the lens of Hegel, not Hegel through the lens of Dickinson. I therefore take Hegelian thought as only one angle of approach, an approach that requires of the reader a much broader
understanding of Dickinson’s heritage. I therefore introduce the Christian ethical, metaphysical, logical, and mystical tradition as an (alternative) important aid to understanding Dickinson’s thought, particularly in her delineation of soul and its nature and activities, and spirit. I also employ, where it seems natural to do so, Platonic and Neo-Platonic frames of reference which, in themselves, often integrate fairly naturally with Christian mystical thought and function as precursors anyway of German Romanticism in general, and, in particular, of Hegelian thought. These traditions also resonate strongly in Emerson’s Essays, particularly “Nature,” “The OverSoul,” “The Transcendentalist,” and “Intellect.” Emerson’s familiarity with the major figures of these traditions (Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, and others) is not only evident in his famous essay “Intellect” but indeed throughout all his works.

I am not arguing for direct influence here upon Dickinson, but rather that we cannot fail to ignore the interpenetration of these important and pervasive ideas that by Dickinson’s time could in a real sense be said not to belong exclusively to any one individual or school, but to everyone. Indeed, the suitability of a Hegelian context, for instance, for understanding a burgeoning America itself at this important time of its self-definition was remarked by Whitman, who has not been considered a philosopher in his own right: “Only Hegel is fit for America—is large enough and free enough.”

Second, unlike many works that move from theory to practice, the guiding light of this dissertation is necessarily the poetry of Dickinson herself. The reader of this dissertation might at times perceive my readings of poems to be exhaustive to a fault, even in a single mode (whether philosophical or theological), but I have made an effort consciously to hold together, wherever possible, double trajectories or even more, of

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signification with the intention of showing that the poems themselves, in so far as they
are records of consciousness and its processes, need to be respected in their integrity and
even in their suspensions of meaning. Sometimes, it turns out to be the case that a
Hegelian model of consciousness applied to some individual poems having this
duplicitive nature, in fact, helps the reader resolve what turn out to be only apparent
contradictions, contradictions on the level of language but not necessarily on that of
consciousness. Because the model of consciousness is the model most operative in many
of the poems that I have taken up, I consider postmodern theories of language (i.e., as in
Derrida, Kristeva and others) not truly adequate to articulating or solving the particular
problems that I argue we are faced with in those poems on subjectivity. One might argue
that from the postmodern viewpoint one can never separate language from processes of
consciousness or the unconscious, that language always has pervaded our modes of
thinking and that therefore thought or so-called reality cannot be privileged over language
(as Derrida has argued on many occasions). Nonetheless, I assert that although there are
many poems that clearly reflect a more postmodern version of the subject constituting
itself through language, in the poems I have taken up (with the exception of a few) the
self-reflexivity of language is definitely secondary to the self-reflexivity of consciousness
in an experiential, almost pre-verbal mode. This does not equate, I believe, to any
privileged access or any claim to overturn other major critical perspectives on
Dickinson’s body of work, whether historicist, feminist, psychoanalytic, etc.

At root, therefore, I work from the poems to a formulation of conclusions or from
poetry as praxis to poetry as an expression of a poetics or theory of subjectivity that
implicitly articulates a poetics (i.e., in the sense that understanding Dickinson’s
delineation of subjectivity within a portion of her poetry in a sense instructs or reminds us how to read poetry that bears within it the laws of the consciousness through and in which it emerges). For a similar reason, I have for the most part restricted my engagement with the vast scholarly literature on Dickinson to footnotes, though sometimes where appropriate I engage this directly in the main text.

Third, while I claim to establish a phenomenological reading, I neither attempt, nor even recognize the necessity of reading these poems in chronological sequence as they were apparently written. For one thing, the best critic in the world could never say that a written expression of an idea or state, i.e., a poem, ever need coincide with the historical instantiation of that thought within consciousness. For another, the dating of Dickinson’s poems has been a somewhat troubled issue even as significant progress has been made in the reading of Dickinson’s fascicles and in the current preference for Franklin’s edition over that of Johnson (first published in 1960). Why these poems I have chosen here? I have picked the particular poems examined here on the basis of three criteria: first, because they seem to me to possess a definite philosophical character for which the normal tools of analysis (i.e., linguistic) are not sufficient; and second, because, in my view, although many people have read Dickinson’s poetry with the intent of saying something about the cast of her mind or custom, few have really attempted to see if her poetry reveals a coherent model of thinking itself; and third, because these poems foreground thought-problems that require the reader to think along several trajectories at once.

Fourth, I recognize that I do have a habit of reading poems in concert with, or against, one another, a habit that is sometimes viewed in historicist criticism as
inappropriately tautological. But as I have argued, the patterns of consciousness, together with their disruptions, cannot be accounted for without some network of parallels and contrasts within such poetry. Dickinson is a somewhat unusual case in that she made a virtue of privacy. This kind of privacy places unique pressure upon all forms of criticism and compels us to find access in any practical way. My methodology here, then, is ultimately again practical rather than critically theoretical or subversive.

Finally, I do not specifically examine, for the most part, ways in which the poet’s consciousness might have been specifically shaped by culture, gender, religion, etc., either in a positive fashion or as a revolt against these pressures. The critics who use these sorts of approaches, though these approaches are highly revealing in their own right, usually focus more exclusively on different kinds of poems in Dickinson’s oeuvre. In addition, I have as a rule tried to avoid fitting Dickinson’s works into a single overarching perspective such as that of religion, although it is obviously unavoidable at certain points in my analysis to refrain from drawing some definite conclusions about the theological characteristics that appear to influence her view of subjectivity.

**Outline of Chapters**

The thesis is organized a little unusually in that chapters 2, 4, and 6 follow so-called progressive stages of an ongoing dialectic moving from perception to elementary self-consciousness to soul-spirit. In a sense, chapters 3 and 5 are interludes taking up “structures” within which dialectic proceeds—absence, negation, and desire in Chapter 3 and intervals and slants in Chapter 5.

I start in Chapter 2 with the complexities of the developing consciousness as they
occur in acts of perception. I argue in this chapter by employing Hegel’s analysis of the sense-certainty mode that Dickinson’s perception is not only inherently dialectical but already presupposes a sense in which the absolute is implicit within the seemingly most simple levels of material perception. Without ultimately deferring to this absolute in perception, the poet demonstrates that a recalculation of both material and faith-based seeing is necessary. In the process, she implicitly redefines mere religious “faith” as a phenomenological excursion within dialectical process. Chapter 2 also examines the phenomenon of pain, not at it proceeds from perception, but as it impacts perception as a prelude to the analysis of absence in Chapter 3.

Both Chapters 3 and 5 are, as noted above, conceptual excursions within the phenomenological trajectory of the thesis as a whole, but they examine two important structures, absence and interval, necessary for understanding the phenomenological movement itself in Dickinson’s poetry. Chapter 3 examines the fundamental role that absence, negation, and desire play in pressing the subject outside of a seemingly self-contained dialectic. Desire emerges at the heart of absence as a positive projection of a higher, more refined principle that will, in fact, come to fruition at a more developed level of the subject, even as it is already implicit in the dialectic of absence. Chapter 5 takes up the metaphysical space of the “interval” as it exists for dialectic and probes not only how the interval emerges but what this space is for emergent subjectivity occurring within and traversing it. Chapter 5 starts, however, with an analysis of Dickinson’s characteristic “slants,” flashes of light, and oblique angles, all of which profoundly disorient, and cross the dialectical interval of, subjectivity, reasserting the existence of

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41 For Hegel, in the development of consciousness, this is the first point at which the subject is painfully apprised of difference and separation, even as she mistakenly attributes this quality as internal to external objects.
two poles bound together in both identity and difference. Both of these chapters, in taking up these particular “structures” as they occur in different poems, end up, to some degree, recapitulating several different stages or levels of the development of subjectivity; that is, it is shown that defining what these terms mean for Dickinson necessitates that the reader examine them in the context in which they occur; and in staying true to the trajectory of subjectivity that I have inferred from Dickinson’s poetry, I have found it necessary to consider the ways in which slants and intervals are colored, for instance, not only by consciousness and perception, but also already by the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness.

Chapter 4 moves beyond those poems that examine vagaries of perception in the sense-certainty mode to those which now discern flaws not simply in the object of a subject-object complex but more deeply within the two aspects or poles of a self-reflexive consciousness. This chapter takes some of its principal theoretical features from Hegel’s complex dialectical movement in the Phenomenology, namely, a movement from the emergence of self-consciousness in the Master-Slave dialectic to its subsequent dissatisfactions in the transitions and dilemmas of Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness.

Finally, Chapter 6 takes up the much broader task of situating soul within the mediating perspectives of consciousness, perception, mind, and self-replicating spirit first, to determine what the soul could be thought to mean and what its functions or capacities might be for Dickinson and, second, to analyze the qualities or activities of self-limitation. Self-limitation is then positioned not only as an implicit function of soul but as a negotiation mediated by consciousness and enacted by a soul that, at a later stage,
actively seeks knowledge or truth. In removing its own preferences and limiting or
adjusting its field of interactions, it appears both to complete and to recapitulate what
were at earlier stages painful, seemingly passive moments of absence, blankness, and
blindness. In light of this, the final part of Chapter 6 considers these self-defining acts at
the level of soul as cohering not only loosely with Hegel’s development of “Spirit” but
more importantly for Dickinson with modes of *apophasis* and the *via negativa* more
traditionally associated with Christian mysticism and Neo-Platonism.

Overall, the thesis suggests that in Dickinson we encounter a new poetics of
subjectivity, one in which many earlier features of consciousness such as body, soul,
mind, spirit, the “I,” the “me,” the “we,” and even consciousness itself, are subsumed
and transformed in what is effectively a very Dickinsonian phenomenology of
subjectivity.
Chapter 2

The Prudent Microscope: The Role of Perception in Dickinson’s Poetics

For the sake of this thesis I will regard perception for Dickinson as approximately constituting the two earliest stages of the development of the subject (that is, roughly, the ego or self in Hegel), namely, sense-certainty and perception proper.¹ I shall do this because Dickinson’s phenomenology of perception, as I shall show in this chapter, seems to straddle these two stages, insofar as Dickinson’s seminal poems about perception undercut or problematize naive sense-certainty and articulate a much more complex view of perception. At the level of sense-certainty, Hegel suggests, the perceiver discovers himself or herself to be ultimately the root cause of his or her own deceptions in apprehending objects available to the senses. At the level of perception, however, the subject learns or experiences that the flaw is not only his own, but that absence and duality are generated or contained within the object itself.² Hegel’s Logic (in the section on the Qualitative sphere of Existence) is helpful in understanding the dialectical negations that can occur within the object at the level of perception. Johann Stallo, the famous American Hegelian³ who wrote what is often considered to be the most


² See Findlay, Hegel: A Re-Examination.

competent 19th-century American gloss on Hegel, and a contemporary of Dickinson, observes:

Finite things exist only in virtue of their negative relation to themselves; ‘they are, but the truth of this being is their end.’ They pass away, not from any adventitious external necessity, but from the laws of their own being. The nature of finite things is to contain the germ of destruction as their inmost being; ‘the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.’ Yet this evanescence is not absolute; their negation is a relative one; they vanish into a higher reality.  

Thus, the act of perception merely illuminates the reality implicit in the nature of things themselves and contains intuitions of the transcendent. This negative-producing truth is replicated within the perceptive faculty. Emerson, in his famous essay “The Over-Soul,” an essay based, like Hegel’s own work, in a Platonic-Neoplatonic view of perception and transcendence, proposes a similar thesis, from the point of view of the

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6 By “Platonic-Neoplatonic” here I mean Emerson’s reading of the entire Platonic tradition (often in the light of other traditions) ranging from Plato’s dialogues to the much later re-interpretation of these dialogues in late Antiquity, starting with Plotinus and Porphyry in the 3rd Century AD and reaching up to, and beyond, Iamblichus and Proclus in the 5th Century. By a “Platonic-Neoplatonic view of perception” I refer to the view of Plato and later of Plotinus that perception is double: as externally grounded, it is fleeting and fugitive; as inner perception, by contrast, or as perception of the contents of the soul’s own nature, i.e., concepts or mental representations (noemata), or even “forms” in the Platonic sense, it is stable and “transcendent” of the otherwise fugitive phenomena of the world of appearance. For a discussion of the doubleness of perception in Plotinus see Corrigan, 2004, 66-72.
perceiver who attempts to apprehend a thing in the fullness of its being and finds this to be an impulse that is frustrated:

... in the nature of things one of the facts we contemplate is external and fugitive, and the other is permanent and cognate with the soul. The things we now esteem fixed shall, one by one, detach themselves like ripe fruit from our experience and fall ...

Both of these perspectives aid the reader in understanding to a degree what the phenomenological approach entails—especially the sense in which the subject-object relationship is troubled at the outset by a dialectic that already threatens to rupture itself. What this involves will become clearer as we proceed.

From the very beginning of her poetic career, Dickinson posed the question of what is required for one to perceive properly. I shall argue that Emily Dickinson’s seminal poems about perception articulate some of the major concerns of Hegel in strikingly new ways. Conversely, reading Dickinson through the lens of Hegel leads us to a consideration in the poetry of three major points: 1) that in the earliest stages of perception (Hegel’s sense-certainty stage), the observer or perceiver can easily become attached to meaning which is more deception than objective truth; 2) that although such a self is easily convinced of what is in fact a distorted or incomplete truth, it perceives also that something is lost; and 3) that the very object of perception bears within it the principle of self-negation and change (Hegel’s perception proper), and that this self-negation is rendered or represented through a quivering dialectic that fails to rest in either

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conclusive assent or denial. Although perception, therefore, fundamentally involves negation, it also implicitly reaches in two directions: on the one hand, toward the transcendent, and on the other, into the depths of painful negation. For this reason, I shall first take up the question of the absence-generating nature of human experience at the level of sense-certainty and perception, and then I shall go on to examine the important question of pain in Dickinson’s poems. The poems I take up here, as indicated above in Chapter 1, are for the most part the poems which articulate an experience, namely, the self or the soul thinking or perceiving, but in some cases these same poems also have the quality of metapoiesis. Dickinson’s poems on pain qualify her poetic assertions about the nature of perception in one significant way: although in these poems she demonstrates that the same dialectical process she revealed to be at the heart of perception occurs, it becomes evident that the content central to that dialectic is transformed. In the poems on pain, not only do we have a dialectic between subject and object, on the one hand, or between different aspects of the object, on the other, but rather a more radical dialectic based upon the effacement of subjects and objects altogether, so that an indefinite oscillation between aspects of absence eclipses the subject’s entire field of perception.

Absence-Generating Perception

Dickinson’s poem 1071 is a direct phenomenological reflection on perception that perhaps best captures her sense of the paradoxical, absence-generating nature of human experience at even the primary level of being, namely, the apprehension of objects by the senses, either at a rudimentary, mostly passive level (equivalent to Hegel’s sense-
certainty) or at a more active, appropriative level (roughly equivalent to Hegel’s notion of active perception). As a poet who demonstrates time and again her love for the simple forms of nature, Dickinson leads her reader to expect that her view of perception might be a fairly straightforward one, yet she demonstrates that the seeing subject’s field of view is always torn asunder by the self that desires apprehension on two, if not more, levels of being:

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object’s loss –
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price –

The Object Absolute – is nought –
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far –

The speaker proposes that, viewed from two different vantage points, the act of perception can constitute simultaneously a gain and a loss: the paradox is bound up in the first two lines of the poem, and is further compounded in lines three and four. It is, first, a paradox that the perception of an “object,” that is, perception normally regarded as an existential test for the validity of material reality (especially in the scientific sense in which we only judge as real and valid those things which we can sensibly apprehend8),

8 Kenneth Stocks (Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness: A Poet of Our Time (London: Macmillan Press, 1988)) reads this poem in a somewhat similar fashion, identifying in it the
could result in or “cost [precisely] the Object’s loss” (note the small-“o”/ large-“O” distinction). This paradox is at least partially dissolved by the fact that the reader is apprised of a transformation that occurs in the object as a result of perception: perception itself brings into being a duality, one which may already exist in the object (although this is not a direct premise of the poem’s speaker), causing, it appears, a splitting off of matter from form, or perhaps simply an intellectual regard of, first, an instance or particular and, then, a universal quality. In this sense, “object” may be regarded as the thing that exists to or for the perceptive faculty. To perceive it in its particular instance is to sacrifice or miss its idealized, universal savor, its form, the “Object” proper. The speaker suggests in lines three and four that what is apprehended in the act of perceiving is nonetheless full of immediate value, a “Gain/ Replying to its Price”; however, stanza 2 suggests that the gain achieved does not adequately balance the loss. The “Object Absolute” becomes

“epistemological question” of “how we can proceed from something that is scientifically valid for us to what it is in itself” (37).

9 Charles Anderson (Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960)) argues that this is likely a Lockean distinction “between the primary qualities of objects, which are absolute in the sense that they exist whether perceived or not (such as bulk, extension, and motion), and their secondary qualities, which depend on the perceiver for their existence (such as taste or color)” (91). I think this reading is much too limiting in light of Dickinson’s obvious sympathetic resonance with traditions of idealism, whether Platonic, Neo-Platonic, or Transcendental.

10 Albert Gelpi (The Mind of the Poet) argues otherwise: “[Dickinson] is concerned not with the ‘Perfectness’ of the ultimate reality ‘that ’tis so Heavenly far,’ nor with the object, which is ‘nought’ in itself, but with the poet’s perception, which more than compensates for the sacrifice of the negligible phenomenal existence”(135). Gelpi does not seem to acknowledge an implicit (or explicit) distinction in this poem between the “object” and the “Object. Without this acknowledgment it is difficult to understand in what sense Dickinson could regard perception as having this commendatory compensatory effect.

Gary Lee Stonum (The Dickinson Sublime (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990)) also takes a different view, but again, one that seems to be based on a failure to acknowledge the speaker’s positing of an “object” and an “Object”: “Whether the gain of perception is fair recompense for the loss of the object remains an open question. Moreover, the acknowledgment that the object has been lost belies the poem’s seemingly Kantian equanimity. The object itself never appears as such, and while its stimulating a perception may count as appearing, this does not quite establish a distinction between noumena and phenomena, things as they unapproachably are in themselves and things as they appear. To have lost the object presumes that one has initially experienced it through some other means” (89). In my view, there is no evidence that the small-“o” “object” in this poem disappears.
“nought” or nothing, distanced by the very fact that its uncaptured ideality is heightened to the extent that it is regarded as highly desirable or “fair.”\textsuperscript{11} The perceiving self goes so far as to mourn the loss of what it cannot apprehend by “upbraiding” the abstract “Perfectness.” Part of the point of the poem, it seems, is to contemplate the process of thought that the self endures or experiences in the act of perception. This process is one of an oscillation between opposing possibilities that dissolve, in turn, each of those oppositions. The very act of apprehending the sensible reality of the object simultaneously brings into being and yet annihilates the Absolute or Universal as an object for contemplation.\textsuperscript{12} This would seem to indicate that, for the speaker, perception demonstrates itself to be an inadequate, or at least incomplete, faculty of apprehending the full spectrum of being bound up in any “object.”\textsuperscript{13} This spectrum ranges from the apparent immediacy of the object to the universality implicit in the object that appears to annul that very immediacy.

\textsuperscript{11} This particular movement, in which desire is heightened by distance, or even absence, is treated as the major focus of Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{12} For a similar reading see William Franke, “‘The Missing All’: Emily Dickinson’s Apophatic Poetics,” Christianity and Literature Vol. 58, No. 1, 72-73. See also Roland Hagenbuhle, “Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process,” 135-47. Hagenbuhle provides a similar reading to mine but draws, I think, an untenable conclusion: “Dickinson has come to the conclusion that all mediating knowledge entails the loss of the object as such . . . Man’s capacity to ‘translate’ reality into ideality is paid for by the splitting apart of the object from the subject. The ‘thing itself’ remains forever ungraspable. . .” It is Hagenbuhle’s “forever” that I take issue with, as this is simply not indicated in the poem. Further, he claims that Dickinson displayed a desire to “regain the ‘primitive’ status of objects” but was “intensely aware of the impossibility of such a project . . .” I argue, rather, that this poem only attempts to say something about perception itself, and as such, tells a story about the folly of subjectivity in a certain mode.

\textsuperscript{13} John Cody (After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1971)), in adopting a psychoanalytic/biographical critical framework, reads this as a poem in which Dickinson registers the status of her presumed secret love in relation to the degree of her claim upon him: “. . .only after the renunciation was a fait accompli did the lover take on his tremendous importance; as soon, that is, as he was safely distant, it became possible to elaborate the romantic dream” (383).
In his analysis of the role of sense-certainty as the most elementary moment in the movement toward perception, Hegel suggests that the phenomenologist who regards from a distance these processes will understand that

[b]ecause of its concrete content, sense-certainty immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found, either when we reach out into space and time in which it is dispersed, or when we take a bit of this wealth, and by division enter into it. . .But, in the event, this very certainty proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth. . .

Thus, in the act of perception, the “real” becomes regarded as a less valuable abstraction, insecure as it is in its stability, and the “Object Absolute,” the universal, in so far as it is highly regarded and thus proves itself to be what the spirit seeks, becomes most real, even in its absence. This poem thus straddles two phases of the self’s thought in Hegel: the sense-certainty phase in which the self becomes or is partially attached to a false or weak truth (and chastises itself for what it perceives as its own flaws and losses), and the phase of perception proper, in which the subject is apprised of a duality within the object itself. Although the poet suggests the delineations of the perception phase in the "object"-"Object” distinction, it is we, the readers, who recognize their implications.

In the stage of sense-certainty, Hegel notes, the approach to the thing must be “immediate or receptive”; the thing must be apprehended without trying to comprehend

This appears to the “I” as a rich and complete form of truth, but is known to a self moved further along the spectrum of Hegelian moments as a deficiency in truth, however attractive or real it may be. To dwell in it is to fail to engage the next level of consciousness that sees the self and the other as mediated. While for Hegel the movement from sense-certainty to the next level of consciousness which recognizes the universal “This” is one which generates a first and then a second negation, for Dickinson, the experience of loss moves in two directions: the apprehension of the universal, itself a negative characterized by a loss of immediacy and perhaps material security, is sacrificed in that same childlike propensity to grasp the immediate, which is an elementary, undeveloped truth, or even a deception. As noted above, however, the poet also seems to suggest that the Object “Absolute” also comes into being almost immediately in the commitment to perception, but only as a negative, a nothing or “nought”; the act of perception itself makes it so by, in fact, omitting or arbitrarily, if instinctively, excluding all the other Thises (instances, or moments of perception). The dialectical movement, however, happens so quickly that the self in perception immediately recognizes its loss and sees that the “perfectness” of perception places the more developed or higher truth further away, almost as a Form in the Platonic sense, at such a distance as to make it

15 By “apprehend,” I mean a primary, simple grasping in which the perceiver does not deliberately reach to attain a sense of formal qualities that extend beyond the particularity of the object as it is (although the perceiver may indeed comprehend in apprehending). By “comprehend,” I mean just this more complex grasping of a thing in its fullest nature, including its formal qualities.

unreachable. This, then, is a rapid oscillation in a self wanting to comprehend both moments and recognizing its inability to do so. It is, therefore, a painful moment.

What Is Required for Perception? Faith and Prudence

Dickinson’s poem 185, one of her earliest poems, shows the poet asking what is required in order for one to perceive clearly. It seems both to support and to oppose the view that perception in its most immediate, elementary, sensual form is required in order for one to apprehend “what is.” The poem initially appears to be extremely simple, but turns out, upon further examination, to be riddled with complexity:

“Faith” is a fine invention

When gentlemen can see

But microscopes are prudent

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17 Christopher Benfey (The Problem of Others (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984)) focuses specifically on this aspect of unreachability in perception, stating that it “is the loss of nearness in the transaction that seems characteristic of Dickinson . . . Is there a mode of relation that could preserve our nearness to the world? This is an insistent question in Dickinson’s poetry” (66). I suggest, in contrast, that Dickinson’s concern is not here for the nearness of the material particular (the “world”), but for the absolute aspect that is idealized, or illuminated in its very ascension by way of perception.

18 Roland Hagenbüchle (“Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process”) recognizes this element in Dickinson, and sees within it Dickinson’s primary expression of a modernist sensibility: “Apart from Poe, she most clearly discerned the bi-formal structure of processes recognizing that discontinuity is essentially a result of the observing consciousness. In this insight, above all, resides her modernity” (144). Hagenbüchle nonetheless recognizes, as I do, that her “experience of a discontinuous world is, however, still counterbalanced . . . in that the fractured universe at the same time allows for the inroad of the divine” (145). This is precisely what I posit in my examination of absence in Chapter 3 and of Dickinson’s slants and intervals in Chapter 5, not to mention, of course, the soul and spirit in Chapter 6.

For other readings of Dickinson as exhibiting a modernist sensibility, see also Daneen Wardrop (who argues that Dickinson’s modernism can be traced through Gothicism in “Emily Dickinson and the Gothic in Fascicle 16” in The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson, ed. Wendy Martin), Kenneth Stocks (Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness), and David Porter (The Modern Idiom (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981)).
In an emergency.

A poem that initially appears to drive a wedge between “Faith” and perception or “see”ing manages, as it turns out, to invoke in its four simple lines 3 levels of seeing: 1) scientific seeing, which could arguably apprehend material reality at a superstructural level, and which employs the aid of lenses to assist the human eye; 2) the middle level, suggested in “gentlemen [who] can see,” refers, ostensibly, to human sight unaided by either divine or scientific tools. Finally, (3) the poem begins with a reference to “Faith,” the sight that is often regarded as an unsightedness, or a kind of assurance that evades the normal processes of perception. The objects proper to each form of seeing could arguably coincide in a single thing, but it is possible to argue that from each vantage point that same object would lose its discernible self-identity and that, to the perceiver, this would be a discomfoting, disorienting experience.

In addition to invoking 3 kinds of sight or perception, and simultaneously capturing Dickinson’s fascination with “processes of size,” the speaker also invokes (and apparently contrasts) two traditional virtues—faith, the first of the theological virtues, and prudence, the first of the cardinal virtues. It is not unlikely that Emily Dickinson would have been familiar with these conceptions to some degree, even though the traditional Western formulations of these virtue traditions were not adopted within Calvinism. This virtue tradition is classical in origin, emerging in the speech of

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19 I use the term “superstructural” here to indicate that more extensive and complex material structural aspect that exists yet is only known by means of the visual prosthesis.

Agathon\textsuperscript{21} at the end of the early speeches of the *Symposium* (with which Dickinson was certainly familiar), developing more systematically in Aristotle, and finding fuller articulation with the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, particularly Augustine and Aquinas.\textsuperscript{22} We will leave this aspect for now and return to it later.

There are, confoundingly, several ways to read this poem. A straight gloss of the poem might read thus: when sense perception is adequate to the object one desires to discern, “Faith” is something “gentlemen” can accept because, in fact, it does not stand alone, but is supported by perception (in which case no belief per se is necessary at all). Faith in this case is a “fine invention” (both an admirable creation and a fiction), but something external to the self and used as a tool by the self to improve the sense of one’s condition (i.e., to see oneself as participating in the divine life) just as the invention of the toaster might have made the British feel more civilized, even if the toaster were a mere accoutrement to physical survival and not necessary for eating itself. To go one step further, faith becomes, perhaps, an object of conspicuous consumption, insofar as nothing is at stake and perception fulfills our evident needs. In other words, when natural human perception can discern what one wants it to, Faith is both acceptable, maybe even socially elevating, and, intrinsically, dispensable on a practical level. If we take “gentlemen” to

\textsuperscript{21} *Symposium* 196c-197a; *Republic* 4, 443c-444a.

mean those of Dickinson’s upper-class circle, this reading makes the poem a subversive unveiling of an acceptable social hypocrisy in matters of religion.  

However, we are told, “microscopes are prudent/ In an emergency,” which, we suppose, occurs when gentlemen can’t see. In such an emergency, faith, although a fine invention, is especially not something we can rely upon, and we require instead a finer invention, the microscope—an intensified form of human perception, or a scientific prosthetic. To engage science rather than Faith, the speaker suggests, is for gentlemen not merely reflexive, but “prudent”—meaning in its purely literal, colloquial, contemporary sense simply expedient or utilitarian. This suggests, in the final case, that Faith is to be regarded as not only an inferior form of certainty about the true nature of reality, but as altogether marginal, displaced, and emptied of its meaning. Louis Martz proposes an interpretation of the poem along these lines, concluding that Dickinson expresses here her own doubt and a subsequent preference for, or rather the necessity of, closely examining things as an alternative to the inadequacy of faith: “Faith is a fine invention, as she says, for those who have it: let them be the seers, the prophets; let them be the caressers of life. But what shall be done for those who live in doubt, in fear, in

23 This is a possibility noted by Charles Anderson (Stairway Of Surprise). Anderson asks, “Does this suggest the decay of religion in her own day to a social propriety?” (35). Further, Allan Tate (“New England Culture and Emily Dickinson,” Collected Essays (Denver: Swallows Press, 1959) 197-211) argues generally that Dickinson was writing in New England at a time of transition and crisis, including a crisis in spiritual vitality: “Where the old-fashioned Puritans got together on a rigid doctrine, and could thus be individualists in manners, the nineteenth-century New Englander, lacking a genuine religious centre, began to be a social conformist. The common idea of the Redemption, for example, was replaced by a conformist idea of respectability among neighbors whose spiritual disorder, not very evident at the surface, was becoming acute. A great idea was breaking up, and society was moving towards external uniformity, which is usually the measure of the spiritual sterility inside” (quoted in Paul Ferlazzo, Collected Essays, p. 83).

danger, in anguish, in a state of emergency? For such as these, she says, the microscopic eye will serve better than the prophetic eye; those in doubt need to examine themselves in sharp detail, in order to find a cure and build a basis for living. Thus the poet of Emily Dickinson’s kind cultivates the habit of self-analysis, sinks within the self to study all experience in close detail. . .”24 I certainly don’t take issue with Martz’s conclusion that Dickinson “cultivates the habit of self-analysis”; but I simply don’t think it follows from the premises he discerns in the poem. If Martz’s reading is what one takes the poem to mean, such content is interrogated by a subtly ironic tone which Martz misses altogether, and by an acknowledgement that the speaker deliberately invokes the notion of prudence in the context of the cardinal virtues, an invocation that further intensifies, chastises, and highlights the failure in faith, the first of the theological virtues, of an entire class, that is, the class of “gentlemen.” Once a reader recognizes the double-layered content of the poem (in which faith and prudence are merely vessels of utility for “gentlemen” on one level, but are also terms which belong to the richness of the virtue tradition on another), it becomes necessary to reread the poem for its secondary (and perhaps even primary) valences.

“Prudence” is ultimately the word upon which a fuller understanding of the poem turns. As noted above, prudence is the first of the cardinal virtues, and its meaning within this context goes directly against the grain of the meaning implied in the first-level reading of the poem, which is bound up, as we have seen, in the mere expediency of

seeing something as efficiently, quickly, and clearly as possible. Josef Pieper, in his book *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, which traces the development and meaning of the virtue tradition from Aristotle through to Aquinas and Christian theology as a whole, points to prudence as an acquired virtue which allows one to see things as they really are, not merely through intensified physical perception, as in looking through a microscope, but in the sense of a comprehensive, honest assessment of reality which evades or suspends our own preferences, is “true to memory” (*memoria*), is swift, decisive, and clear-sighted in its ability to judge well (*solertia*), proceeds through humility and a proper sense of one’s place in the universe and is open-minded to the diversity of possibilities (*docilitas*), and always involves the historical, experiential self. Pieper writes,

“Prudence as cognition,” as cognition of the concrete situation of concrete action, includes above all the ability to be still in order to attain objective perception of reality. There is in addition the patient effort of experience (*experimentum*), which cannot be evaded or replaced by any arbitrary, short-circuiting resort to “faith”—let alone by the “philosophical” point of view which confines itself to seeing the general rather than the particular. . .

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25 See also Charles Anderson, *Stairway of Surprise*, 34-5. Anderson cleverly recognizes two senses in which prudence (*prudens*) might be regarded in this poem, but in invoking the second sense (not prudence as mere utility) he places it within the medieval religious tradition in which, he argues, it meant “endowed with the capacity of perceiving divine truth” (34). To examine the more specific context for this term within the virtue tradition as I do extends Anderson’s proposition and provides a more highly nuanced reading. Anderson concludes ultimately that “this is a word game, not a poem” (35), a statement that radically underestimates both the rhetorical and philosophical power of this poem.

In Dickinson’s poem prudence is apparently juxtaposed with faith by “gentlemen”, and because prudence is associated with the extraordinary vision afforded by science, there is created an apparent juxtaposition between faith and science (or reason), and science is found to be a superior form of seeing. Pieper, in outlining the relationship between faith and prudence in the virtue tradition, also seems to juxtapose faith and prudence, but in fact what he suggests is that the relationship between the two virtues must be carefully negotiated, that one must know what each virtue implies, and that in no sense is the attainment or the practice of any particular virtue an easy process that allows one to cut corners or evade real effort.

Like Dickinson in the poem above, Pieper places the word “faith” in quotation marks, suggesting that he means faith as it is commonly conceived, as a mere unreasoning acceptance, not as a rich belief that might be aided by or involve reason. In Christian theology as developed through the lens of Aquinas, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (love) precede the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. In fact, Pieper writes, “The “infused” prudence of the Christian presupposes . . . the three theological virtues,” just as justice, fortitude, and temperance presuppose the virtue of “seeing rightly” bound up in prudence. Prudence, moreover, involves the exercise of good judgment, an exercise that goes well beyond any single act of perception mediated by science. It might include a single act of perception, of a particular instance of a concrete reality, but it is certainly not limited to this. Rather, proper prudence would guide the human being in knowing what to make of our direct or mediated experience of a particular. Because of its expansive comprehensiveness based in the historical self, proper prudence can include or contain both generalities and
particularities, both “objects” and “Objects,” or instances and Absolutes, dissolving or at least resolving the painful oscillations suggested in poem 1071 in which the self feels forced to choose between the gains achieved in the apprehension of either an instance or an Absolute. As Pieper points out, the practice of prudence involves a particular kind of “patient effort of experience,” one which considers a capitulation to the merely philosophical, a capitulation solely to the general or the Absolute, just as much an evasion as is a capitulation to the microscopic view, or to the object proper. Pieper also states: “The good is prudent beforehand; but that is prudent which is in keeping with reality” (9). Hence, it would seem, prudence is that virtue which in fact links the natural with the supernatural, the ideal with the real, the abstractly rational with the concretely scientific. Ultimately, then, Dickinson’s entire poem is one in which a stable, grounded meaning implicit in linguistic reference is demonstrated by the poet to be abused; in this recognition, the reader is compelled to reconsider the central terms to uncover the source of the poet’s protest, and the nature of that protest.

In sum, therefore, in order for faith not to be merely a fine invention, the poet suggests that careful exercise of prudence in a symbiotic relationship between the natural and the supernatural or between science and knowledge is necessary. This is not prudence in any contemporary colloquial sense as meaning simply expediency but prudence in the context of the cardinal and theological virtues. This means also that a mere reversion to microscopic vision is clearly inadequate as a tool for seeing anything fully. The only kind of microscopic vision which is truly prudent is not a literal rending
of so-called objective reality but a broader vision transfixes by a certain critical irony.27

The vision of an object is no simple matter. Real microscopic vision infinitely expands its field not to exclude either prudence or faith, but to open up and problematize all the different perspectives involved, for it calls into question all our preferences—whether for “faith” alone or for the scientific prosthetic.

The work that is involved with the acquisition of real prudence is the work of a lifetime, and it is a work that always negotiates the middle and sometimes seemingly vacuous space between the apparent oppositions listed above. This is precisely what Dickinson seems to explore in poem 926,

Patience – has a quiet Outer –

Patience – Look within –

Is an insect’s futile forces

Infinites – between –

‘Scaping one – against the other

Fruitlesser to fling

27 Patrick Keane (Emily Dickinson’s Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008)) argues, in contrast, that in a poem such as this Dickinson “endorse[s] the ‘illumination’ specifically associated with science and the Enlightenment” and “dramatize[s] the agon between skeptical doubt and religious ‘faith,’” certainly when faith is alternately wrestled with and fervently or desperately clung to, and even when it is acknowledged to be an ignus fatuus or an invention. . .” (178). I think this is an oversimplified reading. For a similar view to Keane’s, see Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller and Martha Nell Smith (a co-written chapter) in Comic Power in Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 18.
Patience – is the Smile’s exertion

Through the quivering – 28

This might be regarded as a statement of the kind of “patient effort of experience” which Pieper regards as a necessary means of coming to see things as they really are, which means, in fact, seeing double or being caught between opposites. The poem captures the intense laboriousness of living in the interval between outer appearances and inner imperatives (“Look within”), an interval characterized by “Infinites” and apparent futility. Patience itself bears the oscillating complexity of the thing it attempts to penetrate, as it presents an apparently unruffled surface beneath which lies a quivering tension.29 This

28 See also Poem 750, in which “Patience of opposing forces” is requisite for the “growth” or development of the interior self:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –

Each –its difficult Ideal
Must achieve – Itself –
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life –

Effort – is the sole condition –
Patience of Itself –
Patience of opposing forces –
And intact Belief –

Looking on – is the Department
Of its Audience –
But Transaction – is assisted
By no Countenance –

29 This view of the fluxional, non-solidity of human life is particularly characteristic of Hegel. Stallo, in “Understanding Hegel,” observes: “… it is shown by Hegel, that existing things are not quiescent, permanent in their existence, and cannot be anywise comprehended as such in their nature, but that they are essentially living processes. Very vaguely speaking, this might be thus expressed: things are not, even for an instant, stationary; they are fluxional, and subject to incessant change. Their apparent quietude is but the quietude of commotion … this change is not merely an accident superinduced from without, but … is prompted by the very nature, the ‘definition’ of the thing within; that finite things are, from an inherent necessity, not only coexistent with other things, but driven to self-negation” (84).
is not a “romantic” view of virtue, nor is the acquisition of virtue romantic within the rich tapestry of the virtue tradition. It means the committed entrance into the paradoxes implicit in human life, not the least of which is the sometimes stark intersection of our material and our divinely drawn selves.

Having some sense of what prudence entails, and of how its fuller meaning seeks to undermine the simple evasions and capitulations of the “gentlemen” in the poem, what about the question of faith? Many readers would be surprised to learn that the conception of the theological virtue of faith allows for and recognizes the same implicit duality that is evident in both perception, as it is conceived by Dickinson and Hegel, and the effort involved in prudence as the cognition that is active perception as suggested by Dickinson and Pieper in unpacking the virtue tradition. Pieper asserts: “Thomas Aquinas has coined a tense formulation for the duality of the matter: in belief, he says, there is ‘aliquid perfectionis et aliquid imperfectionis,’ an element of perfection and an element of imperfection. The perfection inheres in the firmness of the assent, the imperfection in the fact that no vision operates—with the result that the believer is troubled by a lingering ‘mental unrest.’” With respect to my re-reading of Dickinson’s poem for its secondary valences in terms of the virtue tradition which I argue she invokes, this important background confirms my suggestion that the tone is ironic; if real faith can bear such dualistic complexity as Aquinas suggests, it is in reality no “fine invention,” as it circumvents nothing and capitulates to no mere simplification. Although I may be going further than the poet intended, it may be that she subtly allows for the possibility in her

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30 Pieper, Faith, Hope, Love, 50.
poem that it is the observer seeking certainty only through the microscopic lens, or in the absolutely material, who thus capitulates or accommodates himself to the weaker vision!

In conclusion to these two first sections, then, Stallo’s assessment of Hegel confirms and clarifies three central points concerning my reading of Dickinson’s take on perception thus far: First, in the earliest stages of perception (Hegel’s sense-certainty stage), the observer or perceiver can easily become attached to meaning which is less, not more, real, insofar as one desires to make into an Absolute what is in fact only an instance. Second, although such a self is easily convinced of what is in reality a distorted or incomplete truth, it perceives also that something is lost in the act of perception. Third, the very object of perception bears within it the principle of self-negation and change (Hegel’s perception proper), and this self-negation is represented through a quivering dialectic (that is, a dialectic of strained intensity) that fails to rest in either conclusive assent or denial. Dickinson also suggests, as we find in “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” and “Patience - has a quiet Outer -,” a more complicated view of perception that transcends the apparent traps and distortions that define selfhood within particular phases of thought; she recognizes, metapoetically, it seems, that perceiving well is indeed a virtue aided by effort and experience, and by a willingness to endure the vagaries and distortions, indeed the painful suffering, that characterizes the act of perception itself. At the same time, she also manages to rehabilitate “faith,” if only provisionally or indirectly, suggesting that it cannot simply be disregarded as inimical to the acts of cognition involved with perception. She thus implicitly integrates the transcendent within perception, hinting at the possibility of liberation from the subject-object complex, and prefiguring later or
other stages of her own thought (and of later stages represented in Hegel’s movement from consciousness to self-consciousness).

Pain and the Distortion of Perception

As we have observed, perception is characterized also by absence and pain. What is the effect of pain on perception? Several of Dickinson’s poems examine or chart the effects of pain on the self. In some cases, these poems appear to register impacts directly on the faculty of perception\(^{31}\), while in others the speaking subject is so deeply immersed in pain that perception itself appears to be effaced, along with any semblance of consciousness (or, perhaps, if pain is what is “perceived,” then pain so completely fills the field of vision that it subsumes all of the dialectical qualities normally implicit in subject-object relations or within an object with a material existence). In such poems, the language of soul and consciousness surrenders itself to images of an infernalesque mechanical universe in which the only autonomy inheres in necessity, and in which the brain is forged like some piece of steel, and “bubbles cool” straight from the fire.\(^{32}\) This

\(^{31}\) Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) ) takes this view: “Dickinson . . . insists [pain’s] torture is a consequence of the ways in which it distorts perception. . . Again and again, she tells us that pain is atemporal and hence dislocating” (27).

\(^{32}\) See, for example, poem 315:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
view exists in dialectical opposition to the poet’s view of the soul, rare and unique, as it emerges from the hand of the demiurge. In the mechanical universe of pain, sensation is mostly destroyed, and the self becomes little more than a conveyor belt for the body: the poetic focus is almost exclusively on the feet, and the eye is at least temporarily blind (“From Blank - to Blank -“). This initial limitation is, nonetheless, conceived as part of a greater whole, a kind of “swallowing up” of substance (Poem 599 “There is a pain - so utter”) which is a temporary necessity akin to knocking a drowning man unconscious so that one can save him before he kills both himself and you. This is also conceived as a kind of suspension and separation of various parts of the self, a willed psychosis that separates out the defective affect in order to keep the self whole. Such separation is sometimes conceived by Dickinson as a kind of radical self-doubt, a skepticism that “suspends the Lives” yet “makes the Living possible,” as it “assists the staggering Mind.”

I will not focus directly on the images of the majority of the poems suggested

That scalps your naked Soul –
When Winds take Forests in their Paws –
The Universe – is still –

33 See poem 365, “Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?” This poem will be taken up in Chapter 6.

34 See poem 761:
From Blank to Blank –
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet –
To stop – or perish – or advance –
Alike indifferent –

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed –
I shut my eyes – and groped as well
’Twas lighter – to be Blind –

35 See below in this chapter.

36 See poem 859, “A Doubt if it be Us.” I take this poem up in Chapter 4.
above, but will confine my analysis to two of these and to three other poems, all of which suggest that the perception of pain primarily affects the way in which the self perceives time, instigating yet another dialectical expansion and contraction that disorients the self. From a Hegelian point of view, one may argue that in Dickinson’s poetry pain induces the conditions within the self that make it correspond to the failures and distortions already implicit in perception—by dissolving the world of objects and subjects altogether, or by appropriating it into the subject—and thus perhaps stimulating a movement into the next thought-phase, or at least prefiguring such a movement.

In poem 410, the speaker registers the reaction of the self in the aftermath of a “terrible” event. Characteristically, this self in the poem becomes at least in some sense double: the speaker’s “I” has a dialogue with its own soul. Both “I” and the “soul” have been victims of the event, but the “I” takes upon itself the project of “mend”ing the nearly destroyed soul:

The first Day’s Night had come –

And grateful that a thing

So terrible - had been endured -

I told my Soul to sing -

She said her Strings were snapt -

Her bow - to Atoms blown -
And so to mend her - gave me work

Until another Morn -

We learn in the first stanza that the “I” has survived the event more intact than the soul, to the extent that it actually wishes to celebrate its first stage of survival, the passing of a single day. The soul is unable to “sing,” here characterized as a violin or lyre from a tradition that goes back to Plato’s *Phaedo* (as in poem 1576 “The Spirit lasts - but in what mode -”) ; its strings are “snapt” and its bow (the soul conceived either as a ship or as the bow to its own violin) “to Atoms blown.” It is worth noting here the explosive dissolution of the secondary agent of the instrument, the bow, into sheer atomic materiality. Why is the “I” apparently immune to the destruction the soul has experienced? Is the violin the body and the bow the soul? Or are both aspects of soul? The bow is clearly the middle term, the instrument through which the materials are capable of being organized into the production of music. Does the “I” correspond to the mind (above soul) or to the whole individual subject under whose guidance or conductorship music becomes a possibility? This could, in fact, be a delusional moment for consciousness. Consciousness thinks it orders and gives time for healing, whereas this may be beyond its powers or, at least, it seems premature at this stage to make any absolute determination. What we can say is that perhaps soul does not fully fall under the

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37 Note the strong contrast with Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (beyond the scope of the present inquiry). Other critics have noted this distinction generally as it concerns the respective poets’ attitudes towards body and soul. Agnieszka Salska (*Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985)) notes that for both poets, “self is central,” but that for Whitman body and soul are not distinctly separated (36-41).

38 See *Phaedo* 85e-95a.

39 See reading of this poem in Chapter 6.
aegis of consciousness for what we observe here is a descent from the apparent oneness of the soul into a fragmented, immense many. As we shall see in Chapter 6, this vulnerable notion of soul, almost entirely material in its description, actually does reflect Hegel’s notion of soul as sunk in the slumber of nature. Ironically, in spite of its inability to sing, the soul can still speak, but only enough, it seems, to communicate a distress it cannot assuage on its own.

The temporal aspects of the poem especially reveal the condition of the self immersed in this experience of pain. First, it is “Night” and not “Day” which is the temporal locale for the proposed celebration of survival. Second, the “I” does not initially appear to be harmed in the injury done to the soul; however, the soul is dependent upon the acting “I” to repair it or, at least, as we have observed, the “I” believes this to be the case. The “first Day’s Night” is, apparently, to be the time during which such repair is effected. However, it seems that before this can be achieved, the self (“I”) is assaulted by another day, this time a day of inconceivable immensity, “as huge/As Yesterdays in pairs.”

It is this immensity, this irreducible expansion of time, an expansion perhaps in perception of the “terrible” event of yesterday itself, that finally threatens to destroy the integrity of the “I” as well as of the soul. The apparent “doubling” of the initial event to the consciousness is in fact the final straw for the ego. The compounding effect of the passage of only another single day on the pain itself presents to the field of vision a single, immense, unified “horror” that completely blocks the vision of the self to anything but that expanse. Thus, expansion of vision is also an awful delimiting: “And then - a Day
as huge/ As Yesterdays in pairs,/ Unrolled its horror in my face -/ Until it blocked my eyes -.”

The new huge “Day,” in “block[ing her] eyes,” also reduces the self to a contractive dim-wittedness characterized by mumbling and giggling, oddness, and a sense that the continuity of the past and present for the self has been severed to such a point that the two selves are unrecognizable to each other:

My brain - began to laugh -
I mumbled - like a fool -
And tho’ ‘t is Years ago - that Day -
My Brain keeps giggling - still.

And Something’s odd - within -
That person that I was -
And this One - do not feel the same -
Could it be Madness - this?40

Thus, in this poem, an experience of pain imprints itself so severely on the ego that the self’s perception of time is transformed—the future, or just the present, is simply an infinite duplication of the past, creating an horrific immensity that the self can no longer contain, and in which the self perceives itself as fractured. The partial brokenness of the soul also extends itself to an irrevocable breach within what the speaker expects to be a historically continuous ego. The person “that [she] was” and “this One” do not “feel the same.” The present self seems reduced to a feedback loop, a “hiccup” of the brain, whereas the past self saw its experience as serially linear. In spite of all this, however, the subjective self of the present within the poem does not govern the poem, or it would, arguably, be incapable of registering its own “befores” and “afters.” There is, apparently, some higher or separate self capable of making the comparison, and the comparison itself belies the premise that the self or “selves” are ultimately sundered.

If this is so, we are forced to consider the poem once again in light of the apparent subjective rendering of experience. As is not unusual for the reader of Dickinson, we are left with more questions than answers: 1) Is the “this One” of the final stanza the current self still caught in the repetitious past, or has it recovered enough to witness its own progression, in which case the poem becomes a mere rehearsal of something it has partially come through? 2) Do we need to attend to the poet’s distinctions here between “brain” and “soul,” and even consider other levels of self that she considers in other poems? That is, if the “giggling” is merely of the “brain,” say, perception, is it at the level of consciousness that the self can see itself, both past and present? Dickinson does, after all, propose in other poems that Consciousness can function, at least to some degree, as a vertically transcendent vantage-point. (In 396, which I will discuss in greater detail
later, she suggests an effect on the soul, and on consciousness, so extensive and profound that Consciousness is enveloped by “A Dimness like a Fog” in the same way that “Mists - obliterate a Crag.”41

Dickinson also demonstrates that pain can have the effect of moving perception outside or beyond the subject-object dialectic altogether, internalizing nonetheless a new dialectic in which the effaced self (as pain) oscillates back and forth across the interval between past and present, trying to redefine its own limits. Poem 650 suggests that pain potentially “blanks” the self, the subject having become what it perceives:

Pain - has an Element of Blank -

It cannot recollect

When it begun - or if there were

A time when it was not -

It has no Future - but itself -

Its Infinite contain

Its Past - enlightened to perceive

New Periods - of Pain.

41 For a discussion of this poem, see below in this chapter.
Pain here replaces the perceiving self, absorbing memory or the faculty of “recollection” into itself. The poet invokes the Platonic tradition in the word “recollect,” but this self-as-pain can no longer perceive its own history or knowledge; the distortion of the perception of time is particularly carried in the use of “begun” where the reader expects “began.” Although the self-as-pain appears to experience the present as a nothing, it also has no future, only (“but”) itself, because containing “Its Infinite,” it effaces all distinctions, all variety. This Infinite, the Inifinite that belongs to pain of this kind, also “contains” or absorbs “Its Past.” The only new perception, the only variety it will experience, is itself duplicated in time—“New Periods - of Pain” which essentially make a mockery of the concept of newness.

Poem 967, also exploring the impact of pain on the perception of time, goes further to draw the reader into a complex web of inversions and seeming misalignments which forces the reader to mentally rehearse the thought-in-process represented here:

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Pain - expands the Time -

Ages coil within

The minute Circumference

Of a single Brain -
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42 See Plato’s *Phaedo* 75e; *Meno* 81c.

43 See Poem 599 “There is a pain - so utter -” which I take up below; this poem also proposes the effacement of self—indeed all “substance,” but suggests that this shrinking into non-being is a process necessary for the safe transport of memory and of soul itself.

44 For a similar reading see Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 161-2.
Pain contracts - the Time -

Occupied with Shot

Gamuts of Eternities

Are as they were not -

Here, we see that pain induces its own dialectically-conceived extremes, creating for perception both expansion and contraction. The very odd thing about this poem is that we are given in the idea of expansion in the first stanza an image of contraction, as “Ages coil within/ The minute Circumference/ Of a single Brain -.” The sense of infinity is internalized within the finite, “single” Brain, creating an internal dialectic within the idea of expansion.

In Stanza 2, the inverse occurs: the idea of contraction, containment, or cognitive reduction is accompanied by an image of infinite scattering, or expansion. This is not, however, the atomization of a single, unified field of time which seems immense (Eternity), but rather the multiplication of what we assume to be linear time into “Gamuts of Eternities.” This is a shocking representation. The only sense in which time is contracted in Stanza 2—aside from the speaker telling us it is—occurs in the sense of a fracturing descent of a single field into a variegated multiplicity, which could possibly be conceived as a qualitative reduction. But there is no mathematical diminishment or even equality achieved in this movement; “Gamuts of Eternities” seem to come into existence out of nothing (“Are [now] as they were not [before]”). The line “Occupied with shot” is
also problematic for the reader. It could mean “Occupied with” in the sense of “focused exclusively on” or it could mean “filled with.” It is probably best to try to retain both possibilities simultaneously; doing so demonstrates linguistically the phenomenological premise that pain, more so perhaps than any other object of perception, makes perception merely a vessel for its contents. Further, this is a perception focused on an infinite scattering of eternities that is simultaneously emptiness (“shot” being the signal of absence as things are “shot through” with holes, or even destroyed), and a filling or pleroma—even if it is of absence (“shot” being the scattered shot of a shotgun). In this sense, then, the reader, and the speaker of the poem, is faced with a paradox that is both typically Dickinsonian and Hegelian: that the sense of the Infinite is prefigured and contained within those moments in which the self seems to suffer even its worst moments of limitation and diminishment.

Thus, this poem registers not only thematically, but also imagistically and linguistically, the misalignments and disorientations to which the self is prone as it is constantly forced to mediate between the experience it lives/suffers at the stage of perception and perhaps the self it is destined to become in the movement toward Spirit. In any case, nothing is resolved in this poem, and we are left situated in the middle of a vast, cognitive space that is less, not more, defined by what it has come to contain.

In poem 599, Dickinson explores a kind of pain which is so extreme that it appears to represent the absolute vanishing point of being in non-being, marking the

45 In Franklin’s edition with textual variants (F, 544), “Being” is a variant for “Substance,” implicitly confirming the sense of my reading.
temporary dissolution of subject-object complexes altogether, reducing selfhood or subjectivity to a mere container or repository of traces of the subject’s history:

There is a pain – so utter –

It swallows substance up –

Then covers the Abyss with Trance –

So Memory can step

Around – across – upon it –

As one within a Swoon –

Goes safely – where an open eye –

Would drop Him – Bone by Bone.

This repository, “Memory,” can move in any fashion it likes—oblique or direct—in negotiating an abyss (created by pain itself when it “swallows substance,” creating the image of a cavernous sinkhole in a previously undisturbed landscape) into which the subject proper would normally fall and thus be destroyed. Interestingly, once the “Abyss” is covered over, this shadowy deferral of images, the receptacle of memory, can step either “around,” “across,” or “upon” it. Its movement is now less than precarious; the line to be walked need not be a fine, careful one. Pain here in this poem nonetheless

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46 Rather than read this poem as an exploration of the self or subject under the pressure of particular conditions, Paula Bennett (Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990)) generalizes to propose that it represents for her speaker an abiding truth: “that the solid world we live in, like the planks beneath our feet, is a lie. Whether pain, death, or madness makes us aware of it, the abyss stretches out before us. The only way across it . . . is to move blindly, as if one were in a trance” (35-6). This, in my view, is both an over-reading and an under-reading.
is attributed a unique function it is not granted elsewhere. It is itself responsible for the
dissolution of substance and for the conditions that will ultimately allow for the self to be
saved or reconstituted—it is what “covers the Abyss” with “Trance.”\textsuperscript{47} What exactly
does the poet mean by trance? The analogy in the second half of the poem assists the
reader. Trance is associated here with a safe “Swoon” (a word denoting “loss of soul”)\textsuperscript{48}
which is distinguished from the dangers of the “open eye.” Thus, trance, perhaps a term
familiar to Dickinson as a result of some knowledge of the rise of Christian Spiritualism
in New England at the time\textsuperscript{49}, is a metaphorical closing of the external eye which can so
easily become an agent of paralysis for the subject who is prone, for instance, to vertigo.
Because this is still at the level of analogy, however, we must go one level deeper to
determine what it means for the subject experiencing the kind of pain suggested in lines
1-5 of the poem. This cannot, at the level of the tenor of the metaphor, refer to the
closing of the external eye; just as the potential of dropping “Bone by Bone” in the
vehicle is transformed into the dissolution of all substance in the tenor. In some sense,
then, it is a closing of the eye represented in the idea of the “trance”—and we are left to
conclude that this is one particular case, one kind of claim, in which Dickinson suggests
that not only is there an effacement or temporary dissolution of perception and
consciousness (ego), but of soul itself, the inner eye that in other instances aids one in

\textsuperscript{47} See also Charles Anderson (\textit{Stairway of Surprise}): “To cover this nothingness, pain makes itself
concrete in the insubstantiality of ‘Trance,’ so that consciousness can step upon it or around it and blot out
the memory of it in a kind of living death” (208). I argue instead that Dickinson designates Memory here
as not the thing which is blotted out, but rather the only part or function of the self which, disembodied and
mechanical as it might be, can traverse the abyss under these circumstances.

\textsuperscript{48} See Liddell and Scott, \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 202 under psyche VII.

\textsuperscript{49} See, for example, Paul Crumbley, “Dickinson’s Use of Spiritualism: The ‘Nature’ of Democratic Belief”
in \textit{A Companion to Emily Dickinson}, eds. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Leoffelholz (Malden, Mass.:
seeing the dark, seeing into the dark, and seeing the nothing (propensities of soul that assert themselves in the via negativa (I will discuss this in Chapter 6)).

Although, as I have argued, this poem represents the impact of pain on subjectivity as rendering not only perception and consciousness suspended, but also soul itself, this is clearly not an absolute or unqualified loss. What is maintained is the potentiality of a historically continuous self that might be reconstituted when the crisis is past, even if this continuity is not strictly linear, but perhaps obliquely constituted. I would nonetheless like to explore one final aspect of this remarkable poem: Dickinson’s qualification of this kind of pain as one which is “- so utter -,” marked off in her not unusual manner with dashes. We could leave off by simply regarding this to mean “so extreme,” but we cannot take for granted that the situation is so simple. Perhaps she also desires to suggest “utter” in the sense of “uttered,” or told, spoken, verbally asserted, etc. If so, we face two possible readings. In the first, we might regard the kind of pain of which she speaks as a pain that is recalled and constituted in speech. The connection between encounters with speech bearing a particular content and the mind’s inadequacy to receive it is suggested in poem 1323, which I discuss at length chapter four. There, we are told that the subject risks annihilation when encountering “news” of death; such news, too mighty for the “daily mind,” is passed on to the abyss of the “yawning consciousness.”

50 Poem 1323:
I never hear that one is dead
Without the chance of life
Afresh annihilating me
That mightiest belief.

Too mighty for the Daily mind
That tilling its abyss
contents, it risks being swallowed up and so overcome with “Madness,” the destruction of the logic internal to every dialectic that sorts and makes distinctions. As a result, the speaker proposes: “Beliefs are Bandaged, like the Tongue/ When Terror were it told/ In any Tone commensurate/ Would strike us instant dead.” It is the second part of this proposition that is relevant to another plausible reading of “There is a pain – so utter -.” Perhaps certain kinds of pain, like terror, in themselves possess the particular ability to annihilate the self at several levels; further, perhaps these kinds of pain especially bear this potential when they are recounted verbally (i.e., and thus reconstructed in consciousness) or “uttered” in such a manner that their mere utterance corresponds to—is “commensurate” with in tone—that pain or terror. This suggests that there may be a point at which the consciousness in its attempts to reconstitute the fullness of its experience, through a process of reification to the other, does so prematurely, placing itself at risk and requiring that it be rescued by an imposition of blankness or “trance” upon the self and soul.

Pain’s stultifying effect on perception—specifically, on consciousness—is described in poem 396 as the final event beyond the endurable limit of the soul’s suffering. There is, apparently, something beyond pain itself, yet more present, or “imminent.” This response is starkly different from other responses to pain Dickinson has already explored. It results not in the annihilation of subjectivity in the free rein of madness within the abyss of consciousness (as in poem 642); and it does not exert a merciful kind of rescue effort by suspending all of the subject’s faculties in order to

Had Madness, had it once or twice
The yawning Consciousness. . .
Yawning connotes not only a kind of indifference or slumber; it also subversively, if implicitly, situates the source of chaos in consciousness itself (chaos is related to the Greek word for yawn: chaein).
preserve the historical record of memory (as in poem 599); but it follows upon the heels of extreme pain as a kind of “Languor of Life” which is akin to an anaesthetized existence:

There is a Languor of the Life

More imminent than Pain –

‘t is Pain’s Successor – When the Soul

Has suffered all it can –

A Drowsiness – diffuses –

A Dimness like a Fog

Envelops Consciousness –

As Mists – obliterate a Crag.

The Surgeon – does not Blanch – at pain –

His Habit – is severe –

But tell him that it ceased to feel –

The Creature lying there –
And he will tell you – skill is late –

A Mightier than He –

Has ministered before Him –

There’s no Vitality.

Here, consciousness is represented metaphorically as potentially functioning as a vertically transcendent vantage point, a crag. It is specifically the soul’s extensive suffering in this poem, however, and its effect on consciousness that designates soul as the even higher function which, in reaching an exhausted extreme, diffuses its weariness or “drowsiness,” and loses some of its ability to refract light from a higher source, spreading only “dimness like a Fog” onto the scene of the mediating consciousness below it, “envelop[ing]” it as “Mists – obliterate a Crag.” This anaesthetized consciousness invokes also the body that lies below it, the “Creature” in all of its materiality. This chain of weakened, drowsy, dimmed impulses seeping down from soul to consciousness and body (and hence, perception) results, not unexpectedly, in a condition in which both affect, perhaps, and perception are lost (both possibilities are contained in the premise that “it ceased to feel”). The “surgeon” who normally is undaunted by pain and is confident in his skill is compelled in such an instance to regard this perceived “lack of vitality” as a ministration, perhaps a merciful one, of a “Mightier” agent.51 Whether this poem is about the entrance into death or not (unlikely, as the soul’s suffering is the center

51 Ruth Miller (*The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1968)) reads this biographically: “The poem is especially poignant when we realize that she is brooding over her recent pain inflicted by ‘A Mightier than He’ Higginson, and that was Samuel Bowles” (68).
of the drama), what it most aptly illustrates is yet another instance where the poet shows us, through the portal of pain, a model of the self which designates a chain of precedence for each of its columnar faculties. Consciousness, which is shown to be able to do so much as a gatekeeper between perception and the soul, is under certain circumstances imposed upon, “obliterated” by, soul itself.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson’s poetic treatment of perception is like that of Hegel, dialectical in several different modalities. At the core of the dialectic, perception generates an absence or a negativity that implicitly undermines the naive confidence that the object exists simply in its own particular sphere—stable, self-contained, and self-identical. Once the subject or self comes to recognize this disjunction, he or she witnesses the dissolution of that initial dialectic, and instead of positing the flaw as originating in the faculty of perception, is cast into a new dialectic in which the object of perception itself contains a duality replete with its own nihilating character. This results in a phenomenology of perception that I have suggested functions as a quivering dialectic that fails to rest in either assent or denial, but which nonetheless yields a vague intuition of a movement toward a higher principle, even if this intuition is itself permeated by negation. As I have argued in relation to “Faith is a fine invention” and “Patience - has a quiet outer -,” this dialectic opens up a more complicated view of selfhood and of subjectivity, one that transcends the apparent traps and distortions that limit selfhood and subjectivity to particular phases of thought simply. Here, Dickinson recognizes the need
for a range of faculties to combine in the virtue or excellence of perceiving well, and to assist the self in enduring the vagaries and distortions that characterize the act of perception. In this we see two simultaneous tendencies in her thought. On the one hand, she implicitly evokes the transcendent within perception, suggesting the possibility of liberation from the subject-object complex, and yet at the same time never evading the negativity at the heart of perception that frustrates the transcendent impulse. On the other hand, as I have argued in the section on pain and the distortion of perception, this implicit transcendent dimension allows her to examine the extreme dialectical oscillations that threaten to eclipse the self altogether in pain, and yet where different dimensions of subjectivity continue to operate, if only implicitly—such as the “I,” the “me,” the “soul,” the brain, and the strings and bow or bodily mechanism, and the small, narrow ego. On this reading, subjectivity is inevitably a doubling or double-seeing at many different levels of an evolving or devolving self, at the lowest level an ego that is threatened with the horror of extinction, and at other levels, a premonition of the stage of self-consciousness in which mind, faith, and prosthetic prudence interplay. The prudent microscope cannot foreclose the field of perceptual experience and rescue itself prematurely from the nausea and incommensurabilities of a dialectic that oscillates between the apparent conviction of sense and the apparent security of the active transcendent.

Throughout this chapter, I’ve focused on the broad question of absence and situated it within the context of perception to give a certain concreteness to a topic that is anything but concrete. Arguably, however, absence is such a pervasive theme in Dickinson that it requires a broader treatment. The chapter on absence to follow
examines those poems of Dickinson which directly take absence for their theme. In particular, the quality of these poems which distinguishes them from the ones I deal with elsewhere, is the desire-inducing effect of absence upon the self.
Chapter 3

The Dialectic of Absence: Psychological Law

Emily Dickinson demonstrates at all stages of her poetic development a concern for absence. Although it would seem reasonable to conceive that a poet living in her age would encounter absence as a quality which makes of its subject a passive victim, a careful reader quickly surmises that for Dickinson it is rather a comfort zone, her field of particular expertise. We might go so far as to say that she has in fact a predilection for absence in many senses: as an object of thought; as an occasion of the sublime; as an horrific void which she must puncture for the sake of others who are not up to the task; as an accommodation to the nature of material reality in so far as matter is merely a deferral of the imageless, matter-less world; and, finally, as a desire-producing potentiality. There are no doubt other senses in which she regards absence, but these categories nonetheless accurately represent a major proportion of her oeuvre, and are the kinds of absence I will discuss in this chapter. She may well have had the kind of mind of which Wallace Stevens spoke when he referred to “the listener, who listens in the snow./ And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” That she is a poet and woman attuned to absence, possessing a “mind of winter,” is suggested explicitly in a relatively early poem in which she remarks that what is “best” for her is what she cannot, in fact, absorb or be imprinted by—or, in other words, the “good” is for her only the thing or things which exist in dialectical opposition to her own being, and which she can only

1 By this, I mean that, unlike our own age, hers was one in which death was more visible, communication less simultaneous and less constant, and distance separating family and friends not as easily traversable.

experience as qualities which come into being for her as absences, or as disclosures of things that will remain undisclosed:

The Tint I cannot take – is best –
The Color too remote
That I could show it in Bazaar –
A Guinea at a sight –

The fine – impalpable Array –
That swaggers on the eye
Like Cleopatra’s Company –
Repeated – in the sky –

The Moments of Dominion
That happen on the Soul
And leave it with a Discontent
Too exquisite – to tell –

The eager look – on Landscapes –
As if they just repressed
Some Secret – that was pushing
Like Chariots – in the Vest –

The Pleading of the Summer –
That other Prank – of Snow –
That Cushions Mystery with Tulle,
For fear the Squirrels – know.

Their Grasless manners – mock us –
Until the Cheated Eye
Shuts arrogantly – in the Grave –
Another way – to see –

(627)

The speaker here conceives of herself as a piece of fabric that, not yet having received the dye which expresses its nature or quality, prefers in fact the “tint,” or color (or disposition) that she is in fact incapable of “[taking].” 3 She chooses, in effect, absence, not because it

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3 Harold Bloom (The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages (NY: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994)) regards this poem as something approaching for Dickinson the status of a poetics “at once Emersonian and counter-Emersonian, a new and wholly personal Self-Reliance and a grand un-naming, an act of negation as dialectical and profound as any essayed by Nietzsche and Freud” (304-5).
turns out that the things she wants cannot be possessed (which in fact might be the case), but because she realizes that in doing so she deliberately attunes herself to all of the things that, in initially disclosing absence, signal an extended truth that must be apprehended with “Another” vision. The “Cheated Eye” is appropriately “arrogant” in this sense; in spite of the fact that its desire to see has as yet been stymied, the very knowledge that it has garnered in its encounter with absence leads it not into a posture of humility, but, ever-seeking, into the realm in which it knows it will come closer to the truth: ultimate absence or non-being, even death.\(^4\)

**Desire-Generating Absence**

One of the concepts or structures most fundamental to an understanding of Dickinson’s view of subjectivity or selfhood is that of the dialectic of absence, the conceptualization of desiring an absent state of being, such that the present state, initially a positive state (because of its actual being-ness) becomes itself a “present absent,” and the initially absent becomes, through the lens of a consciousness heightened by this very dialectic, an “absent present” more real than one’s current state could ever be. Rather than affirm presence, the speaker or poet in this mode proposes a willed rejection of the security of presentness or presence for a redemptive desire. This particular dialectical movement is one that does not occur entirely in time, but is rather a movement of the

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\(^4\) Charles Anderson (*Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*) takes a somewhat different view: “The eye, cheated by the inscrutable forms of nature during life, will see at last the meaning of its process as ending in the extinction of death or the vision of immortality” (86). I don’t think she is admitting the possibility of an “extinction” at all; the eye is “arrogant” because it knows that if it will not see any other way (i.e., in the sensual path of life), it will see in death, whether it sees a vision that completes and fulfills the withholdings of nature, or whether it “sees” non-being itself, which is arguably prefigured in the reticence of nature to reveal its secrets.
mind. In poem 355, the speaker charts the seductive power of the imagination in an attempt to demonstrate how ideal states are heightened in moments characterized by loss or absence. In doing so she invokes three objects of desire, each arguably demonstrating different levels in the perfection of human life: first, desire for simple physical comfort and normal function; second, a desire for the divine which in fact makes of human brokenness a kind of virtue; and, finally, third, a desire that is born of human love, but which is conceived in terms of a divine yearning that most clearly and completely draws into relief the paradoxical connection between absence, desire, and redemption in absence (or even in active renunciation).  

'Tis Opposites – entice –
Deformed Men – ponder grace –
Bright fires – the blanketless –
The Lost – Day’s face –

The Blind – esteem it be
Enough Estate – to see –
The Captive – struggles new
For deeming – Beggars – play –

To lack – enamor Thee –
Tho’ the Divinity –
Be only
Me –

The first two stanzas of the poem initially seem mostly straightforward, outlining the kinds of oppositions that one might find enticing—in each case the enticing opposition is clearly a state of perceived wholeness, in a physical sense (gracefulness for

\[^5\] For renunciation as a proper function of the oscillating movement of soul to spirit and vice versa, see Chapter 6, Section 2.
the deformed man, sight for the blind, and warmth for the blanketless). This makes the poem at first glance a simple reflection of the principle that the psyche is conditioned to lament the sufferings it incurs with reference to the ailing, incomplete, or suffering body by readjusting its reference point from the exceptional or perfect to the merely normal—that is, toward simple wholeness, not necessarily transcendence. In other words, the psyche is conditioned to search for what is merely adequate or “enough” when it is faced with the paucity of human existence. At second glance, however, another level of meaning emerges, one that may be conceived simultaneously with the first. In this case, the desire that is heightened is of a metaphysical, or even spiritual nature—is a desire for grace of one who labors in a postlapsarian state of brokenness (thus, the speaker refers to the desire for “grace” of “Deformed Men”; the light of day [or the shining face of Christ] for one who is “lost,” and freedom for the captive who imagines even the moneyless beggar at play). All of these oppositions are apparently governed by the first line, which presents, as it were, the psychological rule: opposites, especially as they are conceived as absences, “entice,” tempting us or calling us forth to a new idea or condition. Of course, the examples provided take this rule from its general aspect (one which we might express in the proverbial “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” a proverb that does not distinguish the initial state as being one of absence, lack, or loss, per se) to a more particular limiting one, as I have noted above. One might question if or why the opening line is needed in this poem, since it seems to express a general law not borne out holistically in the opening stanzas. A careful reading of stanza 3, however, demonstrates

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6 This sense of “grace” is noted by Brita Lindberg-Seyersted (The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968)): “‘Grace’ is used in its aesthetic sense as a contrast to ugliness and imperfection” (266). Lindberg-Seyersted’s reading as a whole focuses on the way in which this poem reveals “the theme and method of opposites” as advanced in pairings of subjects-objects and in other syntactical patterns.
that the speaker requires this general law, and its specific formulation, for the sake of the argument she poses there: the opening of stanza 3 might well have read, “To lack, therefore – enamor Thee - .” The argument that is made is not directly stated, but is one which must be inferred through the recognition that what all share in the opening stanzas is a heightened desire or consciousness, one stimulated precisely by absence or lack. Such absence is conceived here in a verticalized sense, from the bottom-up. This point of view of absence is a creative one, affirming and building its idea of “Divinity” with nothing but the materials of the speaker’s own consciousness. In the final stanza, therefore, the speaker suggests to the addressee that (he?) consciously and deliberately choose or fall in love with absence or “lack” so that, as a result, she herself becomes for him “divine,” simply as a result of the amplification of the absent in the heightened consciousness of him for whom she is not currently present.

The second to fourth lines of the last stanza (“Tho’ the Divinity - /Be only /Me –”) also lead the reader to reexamine the analogical content of the oppositions outlined in stanzas 1 and 2 and ultimately conclude that, for the speaker, the intense yearning often attributed to ascetics in their love for God is something she recognizes and desires for herself: if “Me” becomes “the Divinity” through this psychological process, then surely the speaker intends us to read the previous oppositions for their spiritualized content, however ironic this may also be. Therefore, “grace” is indeed the grace of God the Father, not specifically the gracefulness of human movement, and deformity thus expresses any quality of spiritual degradation (this becomes true especially if we read “deformity” in the Platonic sense,7 as in the destruction or absence of form, of intelligible reality itself). “Bright fires” could well be the Holy Spirit, the third member of the

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7 For deformity and “ugliness” see Plotinus, *Enneads* I 6, 203; II 4; and Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 87.
Trinity pondered by one who, perhaps like John the Baptist, sleeps on the cold, hard ground; finally, the “Day’s face,” the sun, in a punning sense is affirmed as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity pondered by one who is spiritually lost.

This kind of conceit, if convincing to the reader, is certainly very Donne-like, reminiscent specifically of the Holy Sonnet “Batter My Heart.” In Donne’s poem, the contrary willfulness of the speaker requires that the “three-personed God” intensify his characteristic activities of knocking, shining, and breathing into an all-out violent assault that will, paradoxically, result in an absolute spiritual restoration. Although Dickinson’s poem doesn’t engage this kind of violence, there is a dialectic at play based in the desire of the speaker, and full of the kind of ironic reversions that characterise her best work.

Donne’s speaker pleads for a forced abdication of the self, which is his own worst enemy. In Dickinson’s poem, the speaker asks, ultimately, for the addressee to engage in a self-chosen renunciation by actually falling in love with (her) absence, knowing full well that the subject “Thee” will be acted upon by the law of opposites to make of her a divine entity and the absolute object of desire. Dickinson uses, ultimately, a fund of implicit Christian theological premises as a background to this poem, in which she proposes to replace the divine in the mind of her addressee. This is not, however, a parody, but a full explication of desire and absence on several levels—for human normalness, for the divine, and finally for human love. The speaker of the poem, or at least a heightened, idealized conception of her, thus becomes the dialectical opposition, the “absent present” brought into full relief through the very act of renunciation (renunciation, in the context of most spiritual traditions is always an act of love, generated through the spiritual will so as to bind oneself more closely to the divine).
By means of the second reading of this poem, what is posed in the first reading as
a kind of frustrated dialectic of desire and absence is transformed into a potentially
redemptive one, in so far as the self immersed in incompleteness turns the inner eye to
ponder the divine nature and grace itself. This movement is redemptive in a Christian
sense because the yearning or desire for God, even for a God who does not appear and
does not give signs, is in fact a representation of the fullness of human nature. This
desire places the human person in a seemingly untenable position. No longer loving her
own life, or the comforts of this world, she is cast into the sheer immateriality of
perpetual exile—from a world that appears a paltry thing, and yet from the divine world
in which she can only partially, if at all, participate. In this poem, therefore, the speaker
almost seems to plead, “My objective existence is, from your point of view, perhaps in
question. What I desire from you is to embrace and truly feel the things you lack and
which are absent to you, and thus be worked upon by the law of oppositions so that, even
in my absence, I may become more real and loved by you. I’m not the great object of
desire that the mystics saw more clearly the more they inured themselves to
renunciation—but I too am part and parcel of the divine.”

Poem 475, although decidedly more ambiguous than the previous poem, also
posits that the dialectic of absence functions to stimulate the imagination:

Doom is the House without the Door –

’Tis entered from the Sun –

And then the Ladder’s thrown away,

Because Escape – is done –
'Tis varied by the Dream
Of what they do Outside –
Where Squirrels play – and Berries die –
And Hemlocks – bow – to God
Although the subject of the poem is ostensibly “Doom,” it is unclear what precisely this “doom” consists of: is it a psychological or emotional condition? Is it a condition in which one feels entrapped, whether psychically or physically, or do these two possible meanings intersect and interpenetrate? The spatial dimension of the poem is evident from the outset; the reader is placed in the subject position; she is in the “house without the door.” In other poems, the image of the house varies metaphorically, from poem 657, where the “House [of] Prose” is juxtaposed with the implied “[house of] Possibility,” which the reader takes to be, in contrast, the expansive, open-ended, many-apertured domain of poetry, furnished as it is with many dissolutions of boundary, such as “numerous . . .Windows” and “Superior [. . .] doors.” For the poet, another familiar tenor for the metaphor of the house is of course the grave, as it is rendered in “Because I could not stop for Death” (712) or in “Who occupies this House?” (892).

For “Doom is the House without the Door,” there are several possible interpretations. First, one needs to account for the verticalised aspect, the general downwards movement of the subject who enters doom. The house is entered “from the Sun,” which could refer either to the soul as it proceeds from heaven in the moment of birth, in which case “doom” becomes mortal life itself. Even this possibility retains an

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8 Sharon Cameron (“Naming as History: Dickinson’s Poems of Definition” in Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson, ed. Paul Ferlazzo (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984)) argues that this poem leads the reader to “interpretive despair” (198). I disagree, as it is possible, I suggest, that two seemingly disparate trajectories of interpretation can cohere in this poem.
irresolvable ambiguity. We learn that “the Ladder’s thrown away./ Because Escape – is done - .” Syntactically, we cannot know whether the poet means that the ladder is thrown away because escape has been a success, or because the subject established in doom is no longer capable of escape and is hopelessly cut off from God. If we accept the former reading, then we witness an implied rejection of a theologically-bound universe; but since the new habitation is doom itself, the subject is caught between two impossible worlds, one from which she flees, and one to which she descends as to an eternal prison.

One could argue that it is more likely that “doom” here is in fact ultimately the grave, the domain of the dead, or the sublunary realm, traditionally subject to Fate or Doom. It, too, is entered “from the Sun” in the sense of the light of day, in a descent into the earth. The passive, subjectless verbs of stanza 1 support this reading. The strongest reading of the poem, however, accepts the ambiguity of these seemingly disparate interpretations, allowing the reader to consider the entrance into life, or mortal existence as a whole, as a kind of death. If we allow the cross-pollenation of a poem such as 657, the doom of mortal life is conditioned by its access to the kind of natural aspects which inform the world of the poet. The house that reduces poetry to mere prose, a house which does not admit the light of pure intelligibility, ensconces its inhabitant in a world in which the imagination is reduced to the variety of a dream of things she cannot see or experience directly. This variety is admittedly very limited, rendered almost as the sullen yearning of a small child who, put down for a nap in mid-afternoon, is held captive by the

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9 This is of course an old idea that stretches at least as far back as Plato.

10 Poem 657:
   I dwell in Possibility –
   A fairer House than Prose –
   More numerous of Windows –
   Superior- for Doors - . . .
absences of the movements of nature that occur beyond the boundaries of his small bed—the squirrels at play, the ripe berries that will fall to the ground uneaten, and the “Hemlocks” that signaled the day of Socrates’ own doom.11

In poem 860, Dickinson suggests that absence, like Death, is characterized primarily by bodilessness. The speaker suggests that in order for one to retain some aspect of the person who is absent, one must adopt the same psychological attitude towards them as one would toward the dead one hopes to see again:

Absence disembodies – so does Death

Hiding individuals from the Earth

Superstition helps, as well as love –

Tenderness decreases as we prove –

Although the poem is ambiguous—we cannot know for certain what precisely it is that “superstition” and “love” help to achieve—in the fact that “individuals” “[hide] from the Earth,” we can only assume that superstition and love will assist the speaker in finding the hidden, or at least in trusting in their existence, either in the temporal, material world, or in the heavenly realm. More importantly, the poet suggests that absence is like death—what keeps the absent present are superstition (faith) and love (in the case of death, faith assists the subject in trusting in the eternal presentness of the dead through the eternity of soul). Further, faith and love are juxtaposed with “prov[ing]” in line 4, a process that we might accept as “testing,” an act that is, at least in a biblical sense, inimical to faith and love. Such proving or testing is the handmaid of doubt which destroys the belief in what one cannot see—in this case, the absent and the dead.

11 Interestingly, a hemlock tree grew in the front yard of the Dickinson home, and Dickinson identified with Socrates from a young age, remarking in a letter to her friend Abiah Root her preference to take the part of Socrates to Abiah’s Plato when they next met.
As in so many of these poems, the subject of this poem is ultimately religious, using as its universal aspect the death of Christ, suggested in the embodiment/disembodiment issue and the implied reference to the testing of the doubting Thomas, whose love for the resurrected Christ was sadly deferred, if only for a short time. It is perhaps no coincidence that, according to Johnson’s sequencing of the poems, this poem occurs between two others dealing specifically with different aspects of skepticism (doubt in poem 859 occurring as a kind of metaphysical aid to a paralyzed double consciousness and in 861 as a destructive force in the type of Thomas, who assaults the Christian mystery in his rage for certainty). In the final analysis, especially read in light of 859 and 861, poem 860 further develops the psychological law of the dialectic of absence—the law that proposes that absence functions to heighten and idealize—to suggest that demanding proof, reasons, or even evidence of that which is absent is to destroy that very absence (and the desire for evidence of its being) one seeks to prove.

Dickinson adds yet another important caveat to the psychological law governing absence and presence. In poem 684, the speaker claims:

**Best Gains – must have the Losses’ Test**

To constitute them – Gains.

Although this poem is dated as having been written prior to the previous poems, it is dated within the same year and arguably expresses another aspect of a picture so far painted of the concept of absence and its relationship to the psyche. We have learned, from the previous poems, something of how the poet conceives loss or absence—but what is the “Losses’ Test”? This must be determined before the reader can decide what constitutes a gain. We can go so far as to say that, in any case, the question of “gain” is
an abstraction, a subjective term dependent entirely upon a function performed in relation to what the poet conceives as a loss. However, the most we have learned about loss in those previous poems is that it is itself potentially a kind of gain! So here we have two concepts, dialectically placed in opposition to one another, and demonstrably capable of transforming each into the other. The most one can confidently say about the Losses’ Test is that a loss is a loss (and therefore a gain) only if it stimulates the self so radically to conceive of its opposite that the opposite which is initially absent becomes, as it were, painfully present to the psyche. Does this mean, then, that “gain” can only be conceived as an absence, and not as something which is concretely realized (such as a loaf of bread to a hungry man or a sunny day to one who has long shivered in the cold)? No—only this: that for a gain to be truly a gain, it must not lose its savor or intensely idealized being when it is actually present. Its expectation must not be more fulfilling than its coming-to-be. (Dickinson uses the word “constitute” to speak of gain. “Constitute” could be taken as “to recognize,” but more convincingly, to constitute means to put together or to actualize in a physical sense. Thus, in one sense, gains only become real or concrete if, in not achieving them, if in their absence, they stimulate desire.)

Whatever the case may be, whether this interpretation has been fairly achieved is for the reader to decide; however, such a reading suggests how masterfully Dickinson is able rhetorically to manage and even to reinvent language which is at root highly philosophical. The convolutions of her defining acts are not superfluous; rather, they are absolutely necessary for her in order to lighten the suffocating weight of the philosophical context adopted and transformed by writers such as Emerson and evident
also in the ironclad Calvinist theology which informed all of New England culture.\textsuperscript{12} I have argued above that I do not see Dickinson’s “metaphysical” poetry as being formed as a direct response to external cultural pressure, and I hold to this view. This is not to say, however, that in forming her own record of subjective experience she could ignore or neglect entirely the traditions upon which her society was built.

Clearly, the point at which gain becomes loss, or vice-versa, is found upon a razor’s edge. Dickinson explores this idea further in poem 807:

\begin{verbatim}
Expectation – is Contentment –
Gain – Satiety –
But Satiety – Conviction
Of Necessity

Of An Austere trait in Pleasure –
Good, without alarm
Is too established Fortune –
Danger – deepens Sum –
\end{verbatim}

First, we learn that “expectation is contentment,” an insight not to be conflated with the poet’s earlier speculation that absence heightens desire and idealization. Expectation is one step away from mere absence, as it suggests a faith or reasonable hope that absence or desire will be dissolved in presence. “Gain,” we are told, is fullness itself, or satiety. However, before the reader can rest in the completeness of these definitions, the poet’s dialectical oscillation takes us away from this apparent fullness to a further awareness of

impoverishment, or at least a belief ("conviction") that one needs more. This could be yet another caveat in the rules of loss and gain, or absence and presence, expressed simply in the proverbial “You can never be too rich,” understood primarily in the material sense. However, this possibility is itself modified by a second meaning of “necessity,”—philosophically speaking, this is the notion of the singular path of cause and effect (i.e., physical or also metaphysical necessity, not merely need). Syntactically, we can consider the division between stanzas one and two as a false one which allows a further variation. Once one experiences the fact that expectation does indeed provide a sense of contentment and, further, believes that to acquire or possess what one expected is fulfilling to the point of absolutely appeasing hunger, one immediately becomes convicted in the belief that it is a law of human nature to find real pleasure not in contentment or fullness, but only on the razor’s edge, the space between. Here, “conviction” also becomes, then, the idea of being absolutely caught or imprisoned in that middle or interval state, the gap between absence and absolute, permanent presence, between desiring and possessing. One must not have, it seems, what one desires completely or complacently. True pleasure is connected to “Austerity,” a kind of spareness suggestive physically of empty space and spiritually of a habit of asceticism or sacrifice.\(^{13}\) Finally, the ideal pleasurable state is one conditioned by a sense of the precariousness of all presence, of all ownership or possessing. Feelings of “alarm” and “danger” are necessary for one who possesses to fully appreciate the depth of what one has.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) This idea in Dickinson’s poetry will be examined more fully in the section on renunciation in Chapter 6.

\(^{14}\) For a similar view, see Greg Johnson (Emily Dickinson: Perception and the Poet’s Quest (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1985)), 95.
Finally, Dickinson also characterizes absence as a quality of existence which allows one effectively to distinguish between the major, or essential, and the minor, or non-essential. This distinction seems (initially, to the reader) to prompt one to disregard the latter in favor of the former. This idea is represented in poem 985:

The Missing All - prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World’s
Departure from a Hinge -
Or Sun’s extinction, be observed -
’Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.

This image of intellectual retreat is also an internal quest for what is also in retreat, or missing—the “All,” the source or principle of unity expressed, for instance, in the Neoplatonic principle of the One which gives birth to the “All.”\(^\text{15}\) It is, of course, the natural human condition to be immersed in the many, “Things,” the extension of the One below and beyond itself, yet an emanation that looks back to its source in a moment of conversion and, thus, of return.\(^\text{16}\) It may well be, however, that the modern condition is one in which the variegated many, sunk into matter, are forgetful of this inner prompting, are distracted by a curiosity which breaks rather than establishes the chain of thought which precedes the movement back into the All. That this is a movement, or rather a

\(^{15}\) Franke (“‘The Missing All,’”72) concurs with this reading of the relation between the One and the All in this poem.

\(^{16}\) Generally see Wallis, Neoplatonism, 57-67 and on emanation, procession and reversion, 66-7, 148-9.
stasis, that requires correction is central to Dickinson’s work. Certainly this is at least partly what Dickinson means when she refers to anything less than the largest disruption of matter—such as the “World’s/ Departure from a Hinge”\(^{17}\) or “Sun’s Extinction”—as too insignificant to warrant her attention as long as the principle of unity remains unobserved, or absent. The poet’s absorption in the absent “All” keeps her from grieving or “missing” (i.e., in the sense of “Disadvantage or regret occasioned by loss, absence, or privation of a person or thing”\(^{18}\)) “minor Things”—material events and occasions that can partake only in the All in a partial or incomplete sense. In the context of the missing All, what might normally be considered events of “major” significance (anything less than the annihilation of the universe, or perhaps human death) become minor. Once again, we see in Dickinson an interest in the comparative or relativizing vision which is evident in so many other poems.\(^{19}\)

However, the reader is not let off so easily in this instance. We are led to consider also whether Dickinson means to suggest that the “Missing All” can, in fact, be pursued through the concentrated focus on “minor Things.” This possibility is evident if we regard the word “missing” to mean “Failure to hit, obtain, attain to, or take advantage of.”\(^{20}\) In this instance, the poet proposes that the “Missing All” by its very nature compels

\(^{17}\) The Latin word for hinge is “\textit{cardo} -- \textit{genitive: cardinis},” a word from which we derive the idea of the cardinal virtues, virtues which are thereby the hinges upon which the healthy function of the world depends. A “World’s departure from a Hinge” is perhaps thus also suggestive of a fall, though I shall interpret this in a different way below.


\(^{19}\) See poem 534, for instance:

\begin{verbatim}
We see – Comparatively –
The Thing so towering high
We could not grasp its segment
Unaided – Yesterday . . .
\end{verbatim}

one to focus on the minutiae of existence which contain intuitions of the All. We thus have a vision of the poet focusing down, not up, her forehead pressed toward matter, not the transcendent, in order to capture the All.\textsuperscript{21}

As in the former reading, it is only major things or events that can interrupt this attempt to capture the All through indirection. What, however, are these major events? Shouldn’t the focus on the \textit{major} things bring us closer to the All than a focus on minor things could? We might consider lines 3 to 6 of the poem as figurative expressions of the experience of death observed. Dickinson refers to “\textit{a World’s/ Departure from a Hinge}” rather than “\textit{the World’s Departure}” (italics mine), which brings to mind the pithy poem in which Dickinson remarks on the essential privacy of the human person as marked by the fact that he “carries a Circumference,” and is basically a world complete in and to himself.\textsuperscript{22} For Dickinson, it is the news of death that can, above all else, disturb the continuity that links past and present, soul and consciousness, “annihilating” the “me” or the acting ego.\textsuperscript{23} According to this reading of the poem, the poet proposes that there is

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\textsuperscript{21} Erich Auerbach (quoted in Linda Munk, \textit{The Trivial Sublime: Theology and American Poetics} (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 12)) identifies a merging of orientations, the humble (focus on “minor things”) and sublime (indirect focus on the “missing All”) characteristic of Christian thought that I see operating here, although in a more abstract manner: “In antique theory the sublime and elevated style was called \textit{sermo gravis} or \textit{sublimis}; the low style was \textit{sermo remissus} or \textit{humilis}; the two had to be strictly separated. In the world of Christianity, on the other hand, the two are merged, especially in Christ’s Incarnation and Passion, which realize and combine \textit{sublimitas} and \textit{humilitas} in overwhelming measure.”
\end{flushright}

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\textsuperscript{22} See poem 1663:

\begin{quote}
His mind of man, a secret makes
I meet him with a start
He carries a circumference
In which I have no part –

Or even if I deem I do
He otherwise may know
Impregnable to inquest
However neighborly –
\end{quote}
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\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{23} See poem 1323 as discussed in Chapter IV, “Beyond Perception.”
\end{flushright}
one category of experience—major things—which frustrates the dialectical movement between the All and the Many that begs for completion. This is, ostensibly, the observation of death, which is replete with its own nihilating character. All else—all other immersion—is justified as an avenue back to the All. This can be conceived as a focused representation of the theological premise that the faithful should live so as to be in, but not of, the world. The speaker treats material reality as a field of signs pointing to what is missing, yet without becoming unduly attached to those objects of perception. It is no surprise, then, that we note that Dickinson could move so quickly from a philosophical reflection in this vein to her next poem, “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass,” and that she could capture so adequately the aspect of one of nature’s simplest yet archetypally loaded forms. This may make Dickinson a reader of the Book of Nature, yet if this is so she poses a much more complex and observational view than Emerson.24 Whether we read the poem as one in which the speaker asserts the necessity of attending to minor things, or one in which the speaker argues for the necessity of sacrificing them and not grieving their loss, what nonetheless holds true is that the vision of the subject is adjusted entirely for the sake of the All.25 A third option, and perhaps the best, combines these two possibilities. It is necessary to attend to minor things for the sake of the

24 By which I mean not that nature and observation are unimportant for Emerson. One could argue that science and the scientific eye are even more important for Emerson. What I do mean, however, is that while “Narrow Fellow in the Grass” may have broader implications, Dickinson focuses with almost preternatural, pre-conscious clarity on the concrete aspects of the object in which she seems to “miss” nothing.

25 Ultimately, then, I see this poem as a representation of the potentially positive effect of absence upon the subject. Other critics read this poem much more pessimistically, as a poem rendering the speaker’s sense of the “loss of salvation” (J.V. Cunningham, “Sorting Out: The Case of Dickinson,” The Southern Review 5, no. 2 (Spring 1969) 455) or as a representation of pain and loss: “Not lifting her head, not needing to lift her head, the speaker sees it anyway, has seen it before all around her, a loss that no longer needs to be projected outside of the self . . . but that is at last recognized as the true face of the natural world” (Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time, 171).
missing All, and it is simultaneously also ultimately necessary to sacrifice those minor things and not grieve their loss. This both/and proposition is one that makes of the speaker a wonderful compound of the Platonist and the Aristotelian.

**Dickinson’s Renunciation: Absenting the Inessential**

One important aspect of Dickinson’s life suggested in the preceding two poems, namely, her ascetic tendency, leads the reader to further consider the nature of Dickinson’s thought and the practical means by which she formed her astonishing poetic career. Dickinson’s ascetic and renunciative impulse, which is remarked upon by so many readers of her poetry and those interested in her life, developed an almost mythological significance in portrayals of the poet, especially in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Claims about Dickinson’s almost-famous reclusion later came to be significantly qualified and even overturned by major critics in the last several decades who have emphasized the degree to which Dickinson was engaged with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, even if primarily in the form of letters and messages and inquiries passed on by word of mouth. It is the nature of her reclusion that is really most in question and, perhaps, the question of what reclusion really is in the first place. Dickinson was no caricature of a prickly spinster; she was, rather, a warm sister and daughter who took pleasure in domestic tasks and who clearly loved people, even as she understood her poetry to be her highest calling. Undoubtedly, relative to the social standards of her own time, Dickinson was indeed reclusive, but more important than her practical habits, habits arguably necessary for real thought and literary expression, her

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26 For an insightful look into Dickinson’s correspondence and her insatiable curiosity about sensitive matters, see Thomas H. Johnson’s *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*. 
reclusion was a quality of the mind, a quality that she found necessary for the seeking of truth, an internal still-point. Far from considering reclusion and renunciation of certain ways of being “necessary evils,” she regarded these perhaps as the “Necessity/ Of An Austere trait in Pleasure,” regarding all pleasure as being marked by careful limitation and the imposition of the will against grasping at and holding greedily onto a material existence that can never provide the fullest of joy to the spirit.

My view of Dickinson’s reclusion differs quite radically from that of Shira Wolosky,27 who argues that for Dickinson reclusion is a protest against “the lack of design in the external work of phenomena and events, where she holds that intelligibility should (but does not) reside” (444). Wolosky argues that Dickinson breaks with the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition which pledges itself “to a spirituality facing inward and heavenward” (445). It is interesting here that Wolosky in fact reads Dickinson directly onto the map of Neoplatonic and earlier thought as if this were in fact the key. I think it almost self-evident that Dickinson is invoking these traditions, even if she does qualify them. Although Wolosky insists that Dickinson is “enraged” at having to “retreat from a world so compromised” (446), a premise with which I radically disagree (after all, so many of Dickinson’s images of retreat—particularly those specifically dealing with renunciation—are positive, concerned with pleasure, virtue, and the avenue to knowledge), I find Wolosky’s other central claim most convincing: that Dickinson is in fact “critical of the dualist representation of the world as a temporal materiality separated, in an unbridgeable and shrill manner, from unchanging, incorporeal essence, spirit, and truth” (446). What Wolosky gets wrong here is that such a dualism is what Neoplatonism

represents—it certainly does not. More to the point, however, Wolosky’s reading of Neoplatonism is a vast oversimplification. Nonetheless, Wolosky’s point is the very point I have made in the reading of the above poem (“The Missing All”), and indeed in my entire thesis. Because Dickinson regards subjectivity as inherently dialectical, self-expanding, and connected to a phenomenological encounter with reality, it implicitly comprehends both the temporal and eternal, even if the self in its earliest stages finds it impossible to hold both moments simultaneously (as it does in the sense-certainty stage as reflected in “Perception of an object Costs”). Because the experience of the self is conditioned by its limitations even as it grows, it is the self, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, that cannot at early stages but can at its apex so perceive the unity of matter and spirit, minuteness and grossness, etc. That Dickinson understands this is evident from "The Missing All."

Dickinson’s renunciative impulse, I have argued, is primarily positive for her, a self-correcting vision (and not, as Wolosky argues, merely a reclusion embarked upon as a furious, angry retreat against a “compromised” world) which nonetheless appears at times to belie the impression created in other poems of a more negative formulation (from the point of view of affect). On the whole, Dickinson’s renunciation is fruitfully regarded as corresponding ultimately to a negative theological view, as an apophatic discourse. William Franke is absolutely right to argue that

Dickinson’s poetry is best understood as a form of negative theology . . . Dickinson’s exploration of modes of negation in

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28 In fact, the term “dualism” itself, a term coined only in the 1700’s, is necessarily anachronistic if read back upon earlier ages. The topic is too large for examination here, but one should consult R.T. Wallis’ Neoplatonism (1995) and K. Corrigan, Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism (Indiana: Purdue UP, 2005), 38.
poetic language enabled her to discover and express what are, in effect, negatively theological forms of belief.\footnote{Franke, “‘The Missing All,’” 61.}

Franke focuses on the Greek term for negation, \textit{apophasis}, arguing that Dickinson engages in a “radical negation of language per se, of any language whatsoever—rather than only of specific formulations and of certain types of linguistic content—that characterizes this outlook, or rather sensibility, which suspects and subverts all its own verbal expressions.”

Franke places apophasis within the context of Neoplatonism and its assertions about the ineffability of the One.\footnote{On the ineffability of the One, See Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 57-7, 114-16, 150-51.} I argue that not only does Dickinson’s poetry implicitly engage negation as a reflection of divine ineffability (in, for instance, her elliptical forms of versification, her absence-and suspension-producing use of the dash, her irregular and often incomplete syntax\footnote{These qualities of Dickinson’s poetry are dealt with brilliantly in Cristanne Miller’s \textit{A Poet’s Grammar}.}, and in the fact that her chosen lexicon, in conjunction with her grammar, often pushes meaning simultaneously in opposing directions); but that also in her poetry she directly takes negation for her subject, in so far as she claims to have observed it, experienced it to the extent that she becomes caught in it, inferred it, and, consequently, in so far as she asserts its necessity in a metaphysical and spiritual sense as a means of indirectly pursuing that which recedes before one (perhaps in the sense of Plotinus’ “flight of the alone to the alone”).\footnote{On the question of the meaning of the “alone to the alone” theme, see Kevin Corrigan, “‘Solitary’ Mysticism in some pagan and Christian mystical writings: Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius,” \textit{Journal of Religion}, 1986: 28-42.} What Dickinson
really seems to be doing is delineating the contours of space (physical, metaphysical, and spiritual) that configure the relationships between the subject and its material existence, between aspects of the subject, and ultimately between the subject and the divine, but without reducing everything to a problem of language or to the question of theological ineffability.

Because Dickinson’s apophasis is not simply one reflecting the inability of language itself to capture what is absolute, unconditioned, or ultimate, but is, first, about the weakness implicit in perception and the oscillations of a divided internal self, we can identify her more cryptic poetry as not only apophatic in several modes, but also as phenomenologically grounded in a genuine Hegelian sense. We cannot do without this phenomenological recognition, or we ironically risk undervaluing some of the poet’s most profound and tightly constructed insights about the nature and telos of the human being and about the nature of divine reality from the point of view of the problematically ensouled human being, whose perception is necessarily clouded or double. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit is a record of the negotiations, both painful and liberating, of the human soul in its attempts to pursue what is real and ultimate (a process which entails the spirit coming through dawning consciousness to “thinking” itself or self-consciousness). This growth, as I have indicated in Chapter 2 on Perception and will show in the following chapter on the Unhappy Consciousness, is always occasioned by absence, desire, and negation in so far as it is dialectical in character, though the character of absence and desire is always nuanced by the context or level of consciousness. At the level of sense certainty, for instance, desire cannot appropriate the truth, for “its truth is the universal, whereas certainty wants to apprehend the This” (Phenomenology, Section
At the level of the barest possibility of self-consciousness, “the first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an existence of its own, which therefore it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it.” And at the level of emerging self-consciousness, still preliminary to the appearance of an explicitly religious consciousness, desire and negation have to work together and in opposition to achieve self-consciousness: “Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self . . . that is why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing.” In sum, Hegel articulates a dialectic of absence, desire, and negation on several different levels none of which is, or needs to be, explicitly religious until we encounter later the dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness (see Chapter 4 to follow). This is not to say that Hegel’s Phenomenology and Dickinson’s poetry culminate in anything like the same vision—it would be absurd to say so, especially since this would mean entering into some highly contested philosophical territory regarding exactly what Hegel meant, especially whether his vision is to be taken as a transpersonal historical one. It is likely the case that Dickinson ultimately asserts a much more traditionally Christian view of soul and negation (this will be explored in much more detail in Chapter 6: “On the Nature and Function of the Soul in Relation to Human Identity,” where I re-frame Dickinson’s apophasis as engaging both a forward-looking and an imaginatively rendered retrospective aspect, both conceived through the portals of

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33 Hegel, Section 111, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 67.

34 Hegel, Section 182, “Lordship and Bondage” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

soul and Spirit). It will suffice at this stage of my examination to look briefly at a highly traditional formulation of apophasis in relation to the divine in a passage from one of the best-known Christian mystics, Saint John of the Cross (1542-91). St. John embodies in two simple eight-line stanzas from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* an economy of desire in the *via negativa*, capturing almost all of the senses in which Dickinson treats absence:

To reach satisfaction in all,

desire satisfaction in nothing.

To come to possess all

desire the possession of nothing.

To arrive at being all

desire to be nothing.

To come to the knowledge of all,

desire the knowledge of nothing.

To come to enjoy what you have not

you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.

To come to the knowledge you have not

you must go by a way in which you know not.

To come to the possession you have not

you must go by a way in which you possess not.

To come to be what you are not,

you must go by a way in which you are not.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{36}\) St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk 1, Ch 13, No. 11.
Of particular interest here is the mystic’s assertion that the “knowledge of all” consists in desiring the “knowledge of nothing.” This is evidently both a negative and an affirmative statement: one must desire to know no mere thing (italics mine), but only that which lies beyond mere physical perception. Simultaneously, one must desire to know the “nothing” or no-thing itself, the unconditioned Absolute, which corresponds to the “All.”

**Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that absence is an integral feature of Dickinson’s poetry and thought, not merely the absence or negation in things themselves, but absence as an integral form of desire pervading all aspects of consciousness and, at the same time, projecting consciousness outside of itself, in its very lack, into the abyss or no-thingness of otherness, namely, in a simultaneously positive and negative sense, projecting it to the threshold of self-consciousness. Such a projection, I have also argued, even if this is only to stimulate the imagination to conceive of alternative, indeed, opposed states of being, can suggest even the redemption of failed perception; but this should not be taken in my view to translate into a thoroughly religious vision or to reduce Dickinson’s nuanced presentations of absence to the crusty preferences of an austere spinster or to the exclusively apophatic theological discourse of Neoplatonism. Nor is it simply an apophasis concerned only with language itself and its propensities to undo or unsay itself. Rather, absence as desire (though of course this permeates implicitly all levels of reality from the material to the spiritual), is at this pivotal existential and psychological level of perceptual cognitive experience both a spur or incitement to ideation and thought and a perplexity or restless slumber of spirit that stays unfulfilled even in its desire. Absence

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37 For apophatic or negative theology in Neoplatonism see Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 57-8, 114-16.
may even lead to a downgrading of desire, as we saw in poem 355, if absence is realized in the self as a fundamental brokenness: the psyche has to readjust its reference point from the exceptional or idealized perfect to the merely normal, that is, toward simple wholeness, not necessarily transcendence. All of this indicates that Dickinson’s radical treatment of absence should not be translated either purely into any single monolithic discourse (theological, denominational or otherwise) or any single dualistic bifurcation (as for example a dualistic division between spirit and matter), as I have argued in the final section of this chapter. Here Hegelian thought, I have suggested, is a useful antidote to single static binary oppositions, for it rejects the division between spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence and, instead, focuses attention upon the emergence of the subject in an already intersubjective world of spirit.

For Dickinson, who was so attuned to the possibilities implicit in absence, a phenomenological approach to subjectivity is large enough to abolish both the absolute solid security of stable objects (whether material or eternal) and a self-satisfied quasi post-modern ambivalence. What we seem to see in these poems is the emergence of a new phenomenology of subjectivity that resonates with Hegel, a phenomenology in which the subject is not substance (whether material stuff or intellectual foundation) but the oscillation of different aspects of its being in all of which absence plays a decisive role.

In Chapter 4 I shall explore some of the further nuances of absence in between perception and self-consciousness in the deepening dilemma of the emergence of subjectivity as an unhappy consciousness.
Chapter 4

Beyond Perception: The Unhappy Consciousness

In the previous chapter, we examined some of the striking features of absence, especially as it relates to desire in some of Dickinson’s poems, and we linked absence with the central role of desire in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the present chapter, we shall examine what may be perceived in Dickinson’s thought-patterns to be a quasi-Hegelian life-and-death struggle between subject and object egos. Again, we will emphasize the dialectical quality that is essential to consciousness or subjectivity in Dickinson’s poetry and chart something of her vision of the oscillating poles of the subject and the unsettled or disruptive existence of emerging subjectivity. But we shall also examine the attempt to establish or maintain a notion that the self is in some respect historically continuous, stable, and recognizable. At the same time, we shall explore the duality of consciousness in Dickinson’s poems, especially two prominent notions of duality, one related to self-development, and the other to the self-identity or landscape of soul. This second aspect reveals consciousness, in so far as it is shown to cohere in some sense with soul, as apparently outside of time, caught between pure vitality and imprisonment and yet, notwithstanding, as representing a "me" apparently adequate to the task of self-development and transcendence. Overall, then, this chapter will articulate some of those major moments in the development of the thinking self, that is, a self that though remaining rooted in perception, nonetheless, through absence, negation, and desire, becomes a self-thinking or self-conscious subject.
Since this development is so prominent in Dickinson’s thought and since it is genuinely illuminated by comparison with Hegel’s phenomenology in particular,¹ this chapter will compare some of Dickinson’s poems with the move from perceptive consciousness to self-consciousness in Hegel, namely, a movement that charts a dialectical course from perceptive consciousness to self-consciousness itself, first in the life and death struggle in the master-slave dialectic, and then in the sections identified by Hegel himself as Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness. One of the central features we shall explore in this chapter is the notion of the importance of death, both in Dickinson and in Hegel. Dickinson, as we will see, reveals consciousness as relating or entering into death in three different senses: first, it contemplates death as an external fact; second, it is transformed into the awareness of death, in which sense it also becomes death; and, third, it confronts death, and indeed is impelled to accept death, as an inner necessity. The qualities of all the poems I will explore here, qualities that emerge as responses to consciousness’s apprehension of death, is a heightened sense of affect, mostly of negative feeling (fear, terror, dread) that does not permit the self any completely secure self-recognition, but rather frustrates the self of this security, even as it pushes the self beyond itself and propels it, however unhappily, through these stages of the dialectic. These poems show that one cannot do without these negative emotions and that they are simply part and parcel of the development of self-consciousness.

In this chapter I have generally followed the chronological order of poems that visit and revisit what I have called (after Hegel) the Unhappy Consciousness, except for

¹ As I have indicated above in Chapter 3 on the question of desire at the pivotal levels of sense-certainty/perception, consciousness/self-consciousness and desire/work.
the final poem, poem 358, which I examine last in order because it provides a valuable
metapoetic perspective on the nature of the struggle of consciousness.

In poem 642,² the speaker assumes, first, that the conditions of human identity
within an awakened consciousness inherently create an unpeaceful or disruptive existence.
She divides the self into two egos, a subject and an object-ego (“Me” and “Myself”) as the only way to conceptualize what she perceives as an internal struggle³:

Me from Myself – to banish –

Had I Art –

Impregnable my Fortress

Unto All Heart⁴

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² Donna Dickenson (Emily Dickinson (Dover, N. H.: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1985)) recognizes in this poem the poet’s use of paradox to “ask a perennial question” about the “question of consciousness’ own awareness of itself” (61).

³ In a reading skeletally similar to my own to follow, Suzanne Juhasz (The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983)) identifies this as a poem in which “distinctions between inner and outer, protagonist and antagonist, turn out to be fictions” (17). She argues that “[v]ictory is impossible, is not a matter of ‘art,’ because enemy and friend are one. ‘Consciousness’ is the self’s awareness of itself and could be vanquished only through the annihilation of self, which would leave no victor, since no self is left . . . If the final dichotomy of within and without is necessary so that we might understand the problem, so is the denial of the fiction, that we might better understand the conclusion: that self-consciousness means precisely the encounter of the self with itself, and that this is a perpetual struggle” (18). In examining this poem through a Hegelian perspective, I argue that in the model of the unhappy consciousness, victories and defeats within selfhood are not fictions but are perpetual aspects of the oscillating character of self-definition in and out of annihilation and nothingness, although at this point, with this poem, the speaker does not precisely make this claim.

⁴ See Emerson in “The Over-Soul”: “. . . the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men . . .” (Collected Works, Vol. II, 173-4)). Dickinson’s poem appears to be an ironic complaint against the enthusiastic totality of Emerson’s vision. How, Dickinson seems to ask, can I, my heart, possibly participate in this uninterrupted unity with all of nature and indeed all of mankind, of “all heart,” when I am incapable even of achieving an internally constituted unity? She seems to suggest, as does Hegel ultimately, that negotiating the interior fractures and doublings without effacing any of the faculties of the self is a necessary precursor to the scenario Emerson describes, and that such negotiations require walls, perhaps even fortresses. (Further, one must perhaps employ “valves” in such a constitution of subjectivity. Dickinson explicitly employs this term in a poem which I will take up extensively in Chapter 6 in the section entitled “Soul and Self-Limitation.”)
But since Myself – assault Me –

How have I peace

Except by subjugating

Consciousness?

And since We’re mutual Monarch

How this be

Except by Abdication –

Me – of Me?

Dickinson is certainly thinking here of John Donne’s “Batter my heart” from the Holy Sonnets, a poem which frames the problem of separation from God as a function of self-enmity⁵; for the speaker of Donne’s poem, the part of the self desiring union with God is left to helplessly struggle without the force of Reason, a faculty which should, in fact, serve as God’s emissary within him, leading him closer to the “three-person’d God.” Reason or rationality has proven too weak or disloyal to aid the will in overcoming itself. Dickinson isn’t concerned with divine union in her poem—the problem is more

⁵ See Donne’s Holy Sonnet X: Batter my heart, three person’d God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn, and make mee new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to ‘another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weake, or untrue.
Yet dearely I love you, and would be loved faine,
But am betroth’d unto your enemie:
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot again;
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except that you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

existentially elementary. Donne’s speaker suggests the necessity of the divine will forcefully overcoming that portion of him most resistant to union. If we are to think of Donne’s Reason as analogous to Dickinson’s Consciousness, this poem becomes a meditation on what for Dickinson is often a most serious problem: if in negotiating our relationships with things and people and forces with which we most desire to be unified (including ourselves) we have to concede the claims of any other part or faculty of the self, what are we left with? A truncated, amputated self? Does the “self” essentially disappear under such circumstances?

We see this problem manifest itself clearly in many parts of the poem. The speaker questions how one can efface, “subjugate,” or “banish” that which disrupts the harmony of the self if indeed to do so is to efface a recognizable human self altogether. She begins, as noted above, by separating the self into the two egos using the metaphorical language of monarchical rule to establish the relationship between them. This poem becomes, in adopting this structure, startlingly Hegelian, throwing into relief the problem of the double, divided, or, here, ultimately unhappy consciousness. The poet emphatically recognizes the duality, as implied in the first line, and proceeds to solve the problem of this dualistic enmity by “subjugating” the consciousness that she cannot altogether “banish.” In the third stanza, however, the speaker examines this option, finding it deficient because she recognizes that, in fact, the one alien self must exist for the sake of the other, that they are inextricably linked. To follow the logic of the poem, we can assume that Me, Myself, and Consciousness are all the same thing, that all are double, and that all represent each other (the “myself” that would be banished in stanza one becomes a subjugated “consciousness” in stanza two, and finally an abdicated “me”
in stanza three; further, “me” and “myself” are “mutual Monarch,” kings of each other).

Hegel explains the problem implied in this struggle for the precedence of one consciousness over another, in terms that strikingly resonate with those of Dickinson:

Here, then, we have a struggle against an enemy, to vanquish whom is really to suffer defeat, where victory in one consciousness is really lost in its opposite. Consciousness of life, of its existence and activity, is only an agonizing over this existence and activity, for therein it is conscious that its essence is only its opposite, is conscious only of its own nothingness...6

Dickinson’s is a complicated poem, primarily because the speaker tests and re-frames her initial conceptualization, finding it impossible to envision a division of powers that would result in an effacement of the problem itself. The speaker requires the pleasures of consciousness, it seems, to enjoy a single all-powerful monarchical rule. To “subjugate consciousness,” which is the cause of distress, would be also to lose the powers of appreciation in the “abdication” of “Me.” What the speaker experiences is the conceptual problem she recognizes to occur, which is a shift between subject and object egos she does not initially expect. The subject ego requires the object ego: to lose it is to

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6 Hegel, Section 209, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 127. Compare also Section 177: “A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it. The ‘I’ which is the object of its Notion is in fact not ‘object’; the object of Desire, however, is only independent, for it is the universal indestructible substance, the fluid self-identical essence. A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much ‘I’ as ‘object.’ With this, we already have before us the Notion of Spirit. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is – this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I.’ It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning-point, where it leaves behind it the colourful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present” (110-11).
lose the organizing framework of the whole, which is the subject ego, but the subject ego
must also be the apparent subject ego.

This poem captures on several levels the problems of identity bound up in the
notion of a double consciousness. The grammar of the poem, as well as its thematic and
conceptual content, brilliantly reflects in a meditative form Hegel’s analysis of the
aftermath of consciousness as it recognizes the “duplication of self-consciousness in its
oneness.” In the portion of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Independence and
Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage,” Hegel posits the following
principle:

Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that,
it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.\(^7\)

Initially, this expresses the sense in which the speaker of the poem regards “Myself” and
“Me” as “mutual Monarch”; Hegel apprises the reader of the essential premise of what is
more commonly known as the master-slave dialectic, in which one consciousness cannot
claim its identity except with reference to what it perceives as a lower, more dependent
consciousness, an other. The problem thus engendered for self-consciousness is that, in
the first case, it desires to perceive itself as self-adequate (“adequate unto itself”—
Dickinson poem 822); in the second case, however, this consciousness seeking a stable
identity needs the adulation of those who serve it—it requires acknowledgment and
“exists only in being acknowledged.” In requiring this dependent consciousness for its
identity, self-consciousness becomes, in effect, a slave or dependent itself; it is bound by
its supposedly inferior aspect. The only solution for the consciousness so situated is to
attempt to exile that otherness that belongs to itself, and thus supersede it:

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\(^7\) Hegel, Section 108, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.
It must supersede this otherness of itself. This is the supersession of the first ambiguity, and is therefore itself a second ambiguity. First, it must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its own self, for this other is itself.8

Dickinson’s grammar in this poem brilliantly traces the true elusiveness of self-identity, as well as the confusing nature of acts of will directed internally toward any resolution of unity. First, although she proposes what is, as noted above, an object-subject ego relationship conceptually, she cannot clearly differentiate the two in terms of grammatical subject and object—the “Me” of the first line is the first person singular in the objective case, but “Myself,” the consciousness that would benefit from the banishment of the

8 Aufheben in Hegel’s text is variously translated both as supercede and as sublate. “To supersede, to sublate; supersession or sublation: negation; dissolution: lifting; English translation of German verb aufheben: to lift or raise up; terminate; cancel; dissolve; and noun Aufhebung: termination, cancellation; suspension; nullification; lifting” (Cassell’s German Dictionary (London: MacMillan, 1978)). This is the idea in Hegel, operative at every point of the dialectic in Hegel, that in the process of dialectic negation moves into the dissolution, nullification or overcoming, supersession of the growing opposition between consciousnesses, as, for instance, the opposition between Master and Slave leads to the supersession of both, a supersession or sublation that is both a losing, a receiving back and a lifting up of itself (Phenomenology, paragraphs 179-181, p. 111: “Self-consciousness…has come out of itself…first, it has lost itself…secondly, in so doing it has superseded the other…First, it must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its own self, for this other is itself”). This opposition between these two forms, Master and Slave, in the longer run leads, on the one hand, to their destruction, their cancellation in those forms, yet on the other hand, to the lifting up of the content of that opposition into new forms as in Stoicism, Skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness. Judith Butler (Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France (Columbia University Press: New York, 1999)) characterizes this as follows: “Desire is aufgehoben in “Lordship and Bondage”; it is canceled yet preserved…..Aufhebung is only the abstract and logical term for a developing set of experiences which dramatizes the negation of difference and thereby posit/reveal ever more encompassing unities or interrelations” (p. 41). According to Butler, the major difference between Hegel’s sublation, which is negation, difference yet preservation, and later post-modern “difference” in Derrida, Foucault or Lacan, for instance, is the totalizing, unitive impulse or the priority of identity over difference in Hegel’s thought: “Any effort to posit an identity…is necessarily undermined by the difference that conditions any such positing. Indeed, where identity is posited, difference is not aufgehoben, but concealed” (183; and for Lacan specifically, 187). While sublation does not figure much in the present work on Dickinson (since it is not a focus of Dickinson’s poetry as such), we might suggest that if Butler’s view of Hegel’s notion of sublation is correct (and not a caricature), the difference between Hegelian sublation and Dickinson’s poetry is that while Dickinson certainly emphasizes, indeed foregrounds unity (“the One”), she never loses sight of negation, difference and suspension. In other words, she holds both unity and difference together.
“Me,” is a reflexive pronoun whose referent is essentially the first person singular subjective case “I” of line 2. Thus, although “Myself” is in the subjective case, it is not truly the subject proper, but can only exist as a displaced shadow of the organizing, overseeing “I.”

This would not be worth noting—nor would it have any relevance—in a conventional poem. Indeed, it would likely bear no mention at all. However, one cannot help but regard as deliberate here that Dickinson chooses to envision the struggle for identity with reference to three terms: “I,” which would perform the act of banishment of “Me” from “Myself,” and which, if successful, would leave “Myself” as the sole monarch. However, “Myself” cannot efface or nullify otherness, as it contains its referent within itself, being as it is a reflexive pronoun. “Myself,” as a result, continues to assault “Me”; what looks like self-identity is, nonetheless, otherness. This might, echoing an earlier stage of Hegel’s dialectic, namely, sense-certainty, simply be the state of the “me” as it lives, however briefly, within a span of time. Findlay, on this aspect of Hegel, observes:

But in the flux of experience the me which experiences always
has different successive contents to its experience, and cannot
therefore be identified with such contents. The me of the moment
may mean to be definite in content, but it cannot express this definite-
ness. It is in a sense as much a plurality as a single me.⁹

This is Findlay’s commentary from an earlier stage of the development of consciousness (Sense-Certainty) as outlined by Hegel, but it accurately represents the problem of the poem on a grammatical level, as the speaker’s attempt to solve the problem of duality is

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⁹ Findlay’s analysis of Section 101, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 509.
confounded by the web of dependency built into the very fabric of the first-person singular pronoun in its subjective, objective, and reflexive modes.

This internal dialectical conflict, the speaker of the poem suggests, could perhaps be resolved by “subjugating Consciousness” entirely (Consciousness representing here both “Me,” “Myself,” and “I”, not simultaneously, but sequentially). If we were to regard this poem as a delineation of stoicism (which is possible, since each stage in the Hegelian dialectic implies those before and after, and since the master-slave dialectic, stoicism, skepticism and the unhappy consciousness all involve the complex movement of recognition which is the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness) within the self-consciousness seeking true freedom, the reader can quickly see that such a mode of being is self-confounding. If the essence of consciousness is self-recognition or

10 In delineating the framework within which the duality of self-consciousness operates, Hegel identifies both stoical and skeptical impulses that emerge as the self attempts to articulate a more unified view of itself. Stoicism, he suggests, posits the “I” or “Me” as the most important element; skepticism, however, annuls the “I” and “the All” or subjugates consciousness to the flux. For a further discussion of this in the thesis, see Chapter 5.

11 Dickinson suggests in another, slightly later poem (859) the positive function of an internalized skepticism which temporarily “suspends the lives” or the activated functions of a doubled self whose weight cannot be borne by the “staggering Mind”:

A doubt if it be Us
Assists the staggering Mind
In an extremer Anguish
Until it footing find.

An unreality is lent,
A merciful Mirage
That makes the living possible
While it suspends the lives.

This seems to be a more successful escape from an exhausting, quivering dialectic, even if it cannot be sustained. Doubt lightens as it suspends, yet the Mind proceeds to find its own path. There is no indication that this is truly a preferable mode of existence, even if it is a survival mechanism; the speaker acknowledges that “living” in this mode occurs, but it occurs only in a form in which what is real and ultimately may require confrontation is regarded as mere illusion—“unreality,” a “Mirage.” Living—process—occurs, but the self is less than an agent, suspended as it is above matter and below spirit without actively seeking either. This suspension of the plurality of self—of “Us”—is a response to what Hegel has suggested to be the painful dialectic of sense-certainty that culminates eventually in a recognition of internal duality that cannot find a credible comprehensive grasp on matter and its stability. The metaphor of the Mind “find[ing its] Footing” is thus appropriate here.
recognition by the other, then the subjugation of the other pole of consciousness is the elimination of genuine recognition or the loss of the possibility of self-identity. As Hegel observes of such consciousness,

... consciousness itself is the absolute dialectical unrest, this medley of sensuous and intellectual representations whose differences coincide, and whose identity is equally again dissolved... this consciousness, instead of being self-identical, is in fact nothing but a purely casual, confused medley, the dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder.\textsuperscript{12}

In poem 642, then, it is the tragedy of the self to recognize ultimately that any act of subjugation, any attempt at complete freedom and independence, is also an act of abdication, just as in the master-slave dialectic the master becomes bound by the very dependent being he requires. However, in this poem, clearly all is not lost. Although it is a meditation on internal unity and dissolution, the poem’s overarching consciousness, the “I,” of stanzas 1 and 2, does not dissolve for the reader; it remains a mediating term that does not fully descend into the dialectical shifts, but stands above and potentially in them, evaluating its own paradoxes and testing hypotheses of being without being swallowed up by them. Dickinson’s rhetorical experiment, her philosophical meditation, is to this extent only a pose or a performance, to the degree that it exists at all as an object to be read, and did not vanish along with the dialectical extremes belonging to the objects of consciousness!

What is also interesting in this poem is the speaker’s hypothesis that a banishment of consciousness resulting in a stable subject ego could be achieved if she only “Had... Art.” That the poem itself is Art and that the poem’s logical conclusion is one of failure

\textsuperscript{12} Hegel, Section 205, “Freedom of Self-Consciousness” in \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, 205-6.
suggests that the speaker recognizes that the art is not good enough to achieve what she hopes for. Perhaps, however, a truly skillful, perfected art could achieve the effacement of that painful self-awareness which burdens her. This raises an important question generally concerning Dickinson’s poetry: is it going too far to suggest that this is, to some extent, her *ars poetica*? Is poetry for Dickinson about purgation, banishment, subjugation of disruptive elements of the self in an attempt to firmly establish how precisely the self is composed? Is technique (“art”=”techne”) and a perfection of technique a means to such an end? Is poetry a kind of philosophy? Does it have the capacity to transform the self in its very coming-to-be? One of Dickinson’s early letters to her preceptor Thomas Wentworth Higginson asked him to judge whether her poems “live.”13 Dickinson’s “Fortress” of the self may be “Impregnable” “Unto all Heart”—that is, invulnerable to any external force—yet here is the living art she would nonetheless send forth as an emissary to communicate her distress, not in banishment or subjugation, but in free existence. In order to propose such an absurdity we need to think of the poem as a serious thing, not merely a pose. The poem, and the problem, are thus like a distress signal: whether the reader “gets it” or not will determine perhaps whether she does in fact “have the Art” (or perhaps, suggestively, whether she has the heart to banish even the ugliest child of herself). No reader reception can necessarily change the conditions of existence for the speaker, except if, perhaps, the speaker sees herself as understood by the reader.

The essential duality of consciousness is also represented in poem 822, but the picture that is presented is more complex, because the poem seems to mediate between a

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sense of duality engendered in a transformative consciousness as it moves through its linear history (which can also be, and is, posited as a kind of unity), and a deeper sense of duality that is engendered outside of time, in the self-identity of soul. The reader faces many problems in comprehending this poem, not the least of which is the speaker’s premise that consciousness has its deepest experience of coming to know itself in death:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

Here, the speaker seems to conflate “Consciousness” and “Soul,” using these terms interchangeably, and suggesting that each contains an implicit duality. The idea governing the first stanza occurs in the speaker’s statement that Consciousness is capable of achieving a historical continuity that gives it an identity and an essential unity. This initially appears puzzling from the outset, because one might argue that in using the term “This Consciousness” (italics are mine), and noting that it “will be the one” to which is attributed a particular experience (awareness of death), the speaker implies that there is another consciousness that will not achieve this knowledge. However, I will argue that “This Consciousness” is posited in relation to another consciousness it will become.

What is the nature, then, of the consciousness of which she does speak? She states that it is one which unites the banal and mundane perceptions concerning nature and people (“Neighbors and the Sun”) with those of the self as it is engaged in the apprehension of “Death,” although we cannot know whether this refers to the death of the body with which the consciousness is connected, or merely to death as a concept which comes into being as negation in its simple contemplation. In either case, the claims of the speaker of this poem appear to directly oppose those of the poem to follow, in which the

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14 For a similar reading of this poem that argues that “rather than extinguishing ‘This Consciousness that is Aware,’ death demonstrates its ineradicable continuance,” see Joy Ladin, “‘This Consciousness that is aware’: The Consolation of Emily Dickinson’s Phenomenology). Ladin argues that although “tragic fact is implicit in the soul’s condemnation to be ‘its own Adventure,’” for Dickinson, “phenomenology is consolation, although not, ultimately, escape . . . Dickinson’s phenomenological forays not only open the caverns and corridors of our psyches but plunge us into them” (35-6).

For a very different reading, see Bradley Styles (Emerson’s Contemporaries and Kerouac’s Crowd: A Problem of Self-Location) who, in discerning in Dickinson a “body-located identity” (45), reads this poem as registering not the continuance of consciousness, but the projected loss of it (italics mine), an “impending event” of which she must suffer the “conscious apprehension” because “sensory impressions [for her] are the only means by which the consciousness can learn about its location in the cosmos” (50). I certainly do not hold to this view.
speaker claims that mere news of death, “too mighty for the Daily mind” (the mind aware of neighbors and the sun?), works only to annihilate the facile self and pass on the experience to an accommodating, internally terrifying, “yawning Consciousness.” In 822 the tone is comparatively heroic, as the consciousness of the mundane embarks upon a journey in which it “[traverses] the interval,”13 undertaking the “most profound experiment/ Appointed unto Men -.” One way to read this poem, and explain Dickinson’s apparently contradictory assertions about consciousness, is to see this as the poet’s proposal of faith in the dialectical movement that will allow one kind of consciousness to be transformed into another. The speaker’s “will be” is worth noting, as it can be understood as “will become” the one “aware of Death,” and will become aware of the fact that it is “alone” in crossing a threshold, or in “traversing the interval.” In this sense, the transformation of consciousness is educative—it demonstrates that beyond the rapid oscillations of consciousness in its minute developments there occurs nonetheless this movement across an interval (although we still can’t be sure what this interval is: the interval between life and death? The interval that consciousness must cross in moving from a naïve trust in being toward knowledge of non-being?). The rest of the poem suggests that the consciousness that makes this movement has internal unity, alone as it is, but this sense of aloneness is both confounded and heightened by an ever-present duality at the level of a soul which is not singular, but “attended” by itself.

This poem could be one in which the consciousness imagines the self or subject at a relatively late stage of its own development, a stage in which it is not destroyed by movements across the interval, but instead finds that it has all it needs for this remarkable

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13 This poem will be discussed further in relation to Dickinson’s slants in Chapter 5.
journey (“How adequate unto itself/ Its properties shall be”). The Thomistic principle of *adequatio*, derived ultimately from Aristotle, is relevant here—namely, the principle which states that the knower or perceiver must be adequate to the thing known or perceived. In other words, knowledge has a subjective aspect in so far as the knowing subject will have excluded from his or her frame of reference anything that lies outside of that subject’s capacity. Such gaps or absences that result from the inadequacy of the observer will thus to a certain extent be mediated absences. What we can or can’t see is limited by our own apprehensive faculties.17

One of Dickinson’s fundamental intuitions here resonates strongly with the Hegelian notion that the acid test for the development of Spirit as self-consciousness is its reaction to the confrontation with death. In the development of self-consciousness that occurs in the struggle between master and slave, or two implicit forms of self-consciousness that are not yet fully realized as self-consciousness but remain abstract in

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17 See also poem 370:

Heaven is so far of the Mind
That were the Mind dissolved –
The Site – of it – by Architect
Could not again be proved –

‘Tis vast – as our Capacity –
As fair – as our idea –
To Him of adequate desire
No further ‘Tis, than Here -

In this poem, the speaker compares the capacity of mind to the notion of Heaven; just as in poem 822 above in which the confrontation or movement into consciousness of death is judged to be a test of the adequacy of Consciousness to knowledge of non-being, in poem 370 the apprehension of heaven is judged to be a test of the capacity of mind, as well as of the adequacy of desire. Like 822, in poem 370, the “proving” of adequacy is both positive and negative. Once the mind is adequate to Heaven, it finds its identity in it to the extent that its projected dissolution is an escape from God, the architect, who can no longer “test,” or “prove” the material substance of His creation. This is an escape into non-being in so far as it is an absorption into the transcendent.
themselves, Hegel emphasises that the real struggle at the heart of the emergence of self-consciousness consists in it becoming not attached to life, or, in other words, its willingness to seek the death of the other in risking its own death. Hegel asserts,

The presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life.

This presentation is a twofold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life.\(^\text{18}\)

In this struggle, the fear of death cannot be eliminated, for together with formative activity and discipline (work - as we saw in Chapter 3 p.93), the self must be permeated by such a fear, otherwise the self-dependence of self-consciousness cannot fully emerge.\(^\text{19}\) In his preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel himself extends the

\(^{18}\) Hegel, Section 187, “Lordship and Bondage” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 113.

\(^{19}\) See Hegel (*Phenomenology* Section 196): “For this reflection, the two moments of fear and service as such, as also that of formative activity, are necessary, both being at the same time in a universal mode. Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains at the formal stage, and does not extend to the known real world of existence. Without the formative activity, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become explicitly for itself. If consciousness fashions the thing without that initial absolute fear, it is only an empty self-centered attitude . . . If it has not experienced absolute fear but only
presence of death from the master-slave dialectic and the development of self-consciousness proper to the entire developing life of spirit itself:

... the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.\(^\text{20}\)

Dickinson’s “most profound experiment” is just this one: it is to encounter death courageously, not armed with any form of special protection, but merely proceeding with the same consciousness (albeit a transformed one) that encounters the beautiful in the prosaic aspects of everyday life. Hegel goes further to suggest that Spirit or Soul cannot in fact come to full being of itself without crossing such a threshold under the threat of death. The soul is made, it is nurtured into being, by the very negotiations of the dialectic that appear to threaten it with absolute dissolution:

It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes abstract

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immediacy, i.e., the immediacy which barely is, and thus is authentic substance: that being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside of it but which is this mediation itself.  

The two final stanzas of Dickinson’s poem nonetheless “tweak” its heroic aspect and touch implicitly upon one of Hegel’s central premises, in the line which identifies the Soul as “condemned to be.” Ironically, of course, the soul is the principle of animation, and therefore, in traditional Platonism, cannot die. The soul, in being “condemned - to be,” not only comes to mediate itself, which is a moment of living liberation; it is also simultaneously cast into or sentenced to a lonely sempiternal self-identity which is a condemnation of sorts. Therefore, the soul as it expresses its essential vitality in the growth of consciousness across the interval of life (or emptiness) still retains its infernal aspect or its condemnation to life. For this reason, this poem belongs to the poet’s reflections on the unhappy consciousness, and thus to this chapter.

While in the above poem, the adequacy of the “daily mind” to traverse the interval (into death) is prefigured, in other poems, specifically 1323, the daily mind is plainly not adequate to such a task. In this poem Dickinson also explores the problem of

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21 Hegel, Preface Section 32, Phenomenology of Spirit, 19. Dickinson explores a similar idea in poem 281, in which the speaker registers another instance of the effect on the subject of “tarrying with death” (Hegel’s term). In this poem, Dickinson focuses on the liberation of fear and terror from their normal bounds, a liberation that gives them free reign, even as the soul becomes “secure” in witnessing the apparently absolute movement into non-being. This all occurs within the concept that “Looking at death, is Dying.” The soul’s apparent security, nonetheless, is double: it is “secure” in the sense that it is fixed, while overwhelming affect takes over, but it is also secure in its future identity as a receptacle for a body gone cold, a security that is both a liberation and an entrapment. The most notable aspect of this poem is the dramatized projection of an end to a wearying dialectic—a dialectic of suspense, one characterized by laborious wrestling.

22 See, for example, the third argument of the Phaedo (79cff.) and also the argument for the immortality of the soul in Republic X (608-612c); Phaedrus 245e-246a.
the self as it attempts to secure for itself a continuous, stable, and recognizable history. While poem 642 assumed conditions of the self under which the self assaulted itself, in 1323 the reader witnesses other, external conditions that threaten to annihilate the “me,” which is analogous, it seems, to “the Daily mind.” The poem, then, fully expresses a separation of powers or faculties within the self, a separation that is characterized not only by limitation, but also by suppression, repression, covering over, “annihilation” (temporary, the poem suggests), or what you will: this external condition is death or, more specifically, the speaker’s “hear[ing] that one is dead”:

I never hear that one is dead
Without the chance of Life
Afresh annihilating me
That mightiest Belief,

Too mighty for the Daily mind
That tilling its abyss,
Had Madness, had it once or twice
The yawning Consciousness,

23 For an alternative reading, see Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*. In this poem, Bennett reads the “Daily mind” as a “conventional” mind not belonging to the speaker of the poem, thus creating for the speaker a privileged position in the poem as one who possesses a unique knowledge: “Contemplating death or possibly madness, the speaker in this poem discovers in herself a capacity for doubt that terrifies her. The absurdity and random quality of death, like the absurdity and random quality of madness—both of which Dickinson summarizes as ‘the chance of Life’—annihilates belief. Whatever the ‘Daily mind’ (that is, the conventional mind) may wish to think, the speaker knows that the only meaning life has is the meaning she chooses to give it. Indeed, it is precisely this knowledge that strikes terror into her soul...” (35). This reading is difficult to follow. Why and on what grounds can Bennett claim that the absurd and random quality of death and madness are “summarized as ‘the chance of Life’”? Further, where in this poem does the speaker suggest that it is doubt that terrorizes her, or that “the speaker knows that the only meaning life has is the meaning she chooses to give it?” This kind of reading represents the danger of not taking this poem seriously as a quasi-phenomenological record of consciousness, or of two kinds of minds (or two states of the same mind) not equally adequate to certain content.
Beliefs are Bandaged, like the Tongue
When Terror were it told
In any Tone commensurate
Would strike us instant Dead

I do not know the man so bold
He dare in lonely Place
That awful stranger Consciousness
Deliberately face –

The news of death spurs the destruction of some part of the self—the “me”—through the agency of a third party (or externally-derived concept that is ideated), the “chance of Life,” which is, potentially (the poet’s grammar is problematic) “that mightiest Belief.” This is cryptic: what is the “chance of Life”? Is it 1) the idea of the mere randomness of existence, a statement of realization that all life is mere chance, in which case death is the more real, stable, yet destructive fact above which Life hovers like a set of dice kept alive on the betting table? Is it 2) the profound realization of the life that truly matters, the possibility of the resurrection and the eternal life? Certainly the second possibility is more likely an analogy to “that Mightiest Belief.” If the “chance of Life” and “that Mightiest Belief” both refer to the Resurrection or to eternal life, why the negative, destructive language attached to these notions in the rest of the poem? First, we must notice that this process of annihilation—literally, “to make nothing,” is something that

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24 I propose this possibility in light of Dickinson referring to immortality as her “flood subject.”
occurs at intervals (whenever she hears one is dead). The idea of resurrection is “[t]oo mighty for the “Daily mind,” causing it to *stir up* or “[till]” its contents from the very depths (“its abyss”) of an almost infinite, over-hungry (“yawning”) Consciousness.

The news of death therefore results in a complete opening-up of the self, but especially of the consciousness. Why, though, does *annihilation* occur? Shouldn’t belief in the resurrection be cause for internal joy, faith, and contentment? If not, why not? Because it is, simply, “too mighty” for the thought-patterns of *daily*—that is, mundane, prosaic—experience to accommodate. It is a problem perhaps of the Dickinsonian “processes of size,” that cryptic phrase appearing in poem 802 (“Time feels so vast that were it not/ For an eternity -”). The belief in the resurrection becomes a “bandaged” belief because its too-thorough contemplation is cause for “madness,” unbearable to the human being immersed in today. The poem thus bespeaks a disjuncture between the concepts of the temporal and the eternal, between a limited form of consciousness that *appears* expansive even as it threatens itself with its negative propensities, and another form of consciousness that can only be inadequately prefigured in lived experience but which likely comprehends all experience.²⁵ The possibility of the expanded consciousness of the eternal life awakens in the speaker the latent possibilities of the limited consciousness which bears a resemblance to it but which, nonetheless, cannot accommodate the potential expansiveness of the other. This is, it seems, an experience of the sublime, which is the uncomfortable experience of being torn between the immensity of an imminent fate, a spectacle that threatens to swallow one up and the dawning realization of the hidden but greater immensity of the self or consciousness capable of

²⁵ Perhaps the condition of a verticalised self exemplified in “The Admirations and Contempts of Time,” in which the “Finite” is “furnished with the Infinite.” See discussion of this poem in Chapter 6, note 73.
realizing this incommensurability. Such an experience of the sublime, though developed by Kant in his 3rd Critique, from Burke and others, catches something of Aristotle’s tragic emotions, namely, fear, pity, and katharsis, and prefigures Hegel’s uncomfortable, oscillating dialectic between dread, understanding, and dawning self-consciousness.

Here in Dickinson the proposition is either to annihilate the “me,” the only faculty capable of communicating the experience and perhaps analyzing it, or to avoid thinking about it altogether, to “bandage” it since one cannot make it disappear.

The next brief problem the reader is faced with is determining the extent to which the tone of the metaphor developed in lines 9 and onwards should and does govern our reading of the emotional impact of the experience of stanza 1. We are told that “Beliefs are bandaged,” just in the same way that the tongue is bandaged when it is told of “Terror” or when what it is told inspires terror. In this case, hearing something terrifying prevents one from speaking of it. So what about the application of this metaphor? First, there is a disjuncture between the terms of the analogy. We might expect that the analogy would make most sense if what is bandaged in both cases were the faculty that processes the terror, or the belief—i.e., that if the tongue is bandaged, then the mind will also be bandaged, or the consciousness of the person so affected. However, this is not the case. Instead, the Belief itself is bandaged, its appearance altered, or at least its presence temporarily hidden from view. Why then isn’t a faculty of the self bandaged? Second, is the “terror” something that applies to the first experience?

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26 For a pithy summary of the notion of sublimity, through Longinus, Kant, Addison and Burke, and Freud; and of commentators such as Oskar Weiskel and Harold Bloom in a discussion of a specifically American Romantic orientation toward (and translation of) the sublime, see Mary Arensburg’s introductory chapter “The American Sublime” (in The American Sublime, ed. Mary Arensburg (NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 1-82).

27 See Aristotle’s Poetics generally and Hegel (Master-Slave dialectic) where absolute fear penetrating the self thoroughly brings about the emergence of a truly self-conscious selfhood.
To answer the first question, it seems that the belief itself must be bandaged because there is no other solution. The “daily mind,” too small, prosaic, or otherwise limited to accommodate that “mightiest Belief,” is automatically bypassed; the belief is passed on to the “yawning consciousness” which, in its attempt to accommodate the belief, moves into territory heretofore unknown and unexplored, moving into a vastness that characterizes the eternal but of which the consciousness can only partially partake. The consciousness, in this process, becomes to the self a “stranger,” while, we may surmise, at the same time becoming more like what it truly is in its spiritual nature (to the degree that it can be said to have a stable nature—if it does not have such a “nature,” at least it may be said to have a trajectory). The confrontation of the self with the potential of eternity opens up the radical disjuncture that truly exists between the material and the spiritual realms. Daily life is too far removed from the life of the spirit for the life of spirit to be recognizable to the self that resides in daily life. Nonetheless, the feeling that consciousness is estranged is “awful” (which we might take as “terrible,” but also as “inspiring awe”), and this awfulness is too much and cannot be surpassed. So, as a result, the belief itself must be bandaged—still held in place, still existing, but not to be faced directly. Alternatively, if belief is bandaged, it is also because it is wounded. Strange, but this is, it seems, an inversion of the Old Testament injunction never to look on the face of God. Here, it is God’s face, or at least a divine Idea, that must be covered over, not one’s own face, because the conditions of the layered self make this impossible.

One last note about this poem: it shows once again to the reader a vision of the self built along a vertical continuum. The self is open-ended in a vertical direction and
seems to connect with the elements of a radical spiritual open-endedness, as happens in so many of Dickinson’s poems.28

Finally, Dickinson’s poem 358 can be read as a meta-narrative for all of Dickinson’s poems delineating the movements of the unhappy consciousness. As the previous two poems have shown, the confrontation of consciousness with death and all its attendant psychic burdens—such as the sense of being condemned in its existence; terror; and madness—heightens the struggle of self-consciousness in its variously conceived states of duality, all of which retain their dialectical character. These poems, and poem 358, which follows, meditate on two aspects of this dialectical relationship, both of which are represented in Hegel’s reflections on the late stages of the development of spirit in the mode of lordship and bondage. First, Hegel posits that the attempt of the self to assert the independence of self-consciousness “consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its

28 See poem 789, for instance:
On a Columnar Self –
How ample to rely
In tumult – or Extremity –
How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry –
And Wedge cannot divide
Conviction – That Granitic Base –
Though None be on our Side –

Suffice us – for a Crowd –
Ourself – and Rectitude –
And that Assembly – not far off
From furthest Spirit – God -

This poem asserts the speaker’s absolute faith that in spite of “tumult” or “extremity” the self is composed in such a manner that it is not only destined to survive but to allow for the ascent toward God, the “farthest Spirit” beyond our own. This poem implies that the powers or faculties of which the self is composed are linked in a vertical continuum which cannot be disturbed or broken by “Lever” or “Wedge.” Perhaps the most interesting image in the poem occurs in the identification of “Conviction” or Faith itself as being at the base of the column of self, creating a “granitic” foundation upon which the entire self depends. The “Us” that “suffices” for a crowd is composed of the columnar self, the “rectitude” or uprightness assisted by conviction, and the “Assembly” toward which it reaches (likely All Soul, or perhaps even the communion of saints) and which exists as a link that extends the column of the self to God. Unlike the Tower of Babel, which was destructible because its “rectitude” was based in matter, this tower is metaphorical, reaching up in faith and righteousness. This poem is clearly one in which the subject has moved beyond the dialectic of the unhappy consciousness to recognize its full trajectory.
objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life” (this idea was rendered clearly in poem 822, as the objective mode of consciousness, the one aware of “Neighbors and the Sun,” that was shown to be sacrificed in the movement across the interval, toward an “aware[ness] of death”). Hegel continues: “This presentation is a twofold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life” (Sect. 187, Lordship and Bondage, p. 113). Second, while each pole of self-consciousnesses must be willing to risk its own life, the fear of death cannot be eliminated, for together with formative activity and discipline, the self must be permeated by such a fear, otherwise the self-dependence of self-consciousness cannot emerge.29

These two Hegelian aspects—the drama of the mutually-effacing action (willingness to die) through which each pole of self-consciousness attempts to constitute itself as self-dependent, and the fear or “dread” implicit within, and necessary to, this drama—are central to poem 358. This pithy poem is conceived through the image of two figures, one elevated, and one “sink”ing. In the second stanza the speaker engages a combat metaphor that allows the reader—and the audience to whom the poem is addressed—to envisage these two figures as enemies on the field of war, one in a stance

29 “For this reflection [the bondsman’s realization that it is in the struggle of his alienated existence that he achieves self-dependence] the two moments of fear and service as such, as also that of formative activity, are necessary, both being at the same time in a universal mode. Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains at the formal stage, and consciousness does not become explicitly for itself. If consciousness fashions the thing without that initial absolute fear, it is only an empty self-centered attitude; for its form or negativity is not negativity per se, and therefore its formative activity cannot give it a consciousness of itself as essential being. If it has not experienced absolute fear but only some lesser dread, the negative being has remained for it something external, its substance has not been infected by it through and through” (Phenomenology of Spirit, Sect. 196).
of dominance and potential victory, the other beneath him in an aspect of submission and potential death. The speaker of the poem, standing outside of the drama unfolding (both potentially and actually—the reader is torn before the opening “If” and the “this, now standing”), proffers her wisdom concerning the illusory nature of both victory (for the bondsman figure) and defeat (of the slave figure) as an encouragement to the self tending toward despair in the face of dissolution:

If any sink, assure that this, now standing -
Failed like Themselves - and conscious that it rose -
Grew by the Fact, and not the Understanding
How Weakness passed - or Force - arose -

Tell that the Worst, is easy in a Moment -
Dread, but the Whizzing, before the Ball -
When the Ball enters, enters Silence -
Dying - annuls the power to kill.

This poem can be read as a lesson articulated by the speaker of the poem to those who “fail” or are in a position of “Weakness” about the dialectical nature of such experiences. Although the poem envisions this within the language of combat, or power, such experience could be any in which the self is threatened—sickness, poverty, etc.—and in which that self feels trapped, seeing no options for its future. Here, the speaker identifies an implicit oscillating tendency between sinking/failing and rising/growing. This tendency, the speaker suggests, is one bound by necessity (it “Grew by the Fact”), going well beyond any simply psychic appropriation (or “Understanding”): the “this,
now standing” which “Failed [at one time] like Themselves,” “Grew by the Fact, and not the Understanding/ How Weakness passed – or Force – arose.” In other words, we learn, it was in the very essence of the “this” which stands above the “any that sink” to move from a state of Weakness or supplication to a state of victory. To give one more take on this, the first stanza could read: “be assured that Weakness passes into Force, just as Force passed into Weakness.” Although this is ostensibly an encouragement to those who shrink in despair from the fate they face, the encouragement undergoes a perverse inversion, as the assurance, as suggested in the second stanza, is really just the assurance that such weakness or despair will be annulled, or inverted, only along with the life of the one who feels it.

Insofar as this is an ironic, blankly comic poem, it is also a poem about the small victories of selfhood in the vein of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, and, more precisely, in relation to the two aspects outlined at the beginning of this section. In many ways, it can be read as a companion to the quintessentially Hegelian poem with which this chapter began, “Me – from Myself to Banish,” in which the speaker also engages the language of dominion and embattlement (“banish,” “Fortress,” “abdication,” and “Monarch”). In that poem, the speaker worked through the problem of self-enmity, concluding only that to maintain some kind of dominion within the dialectic of consciousness from which emerge the shadowy adversaries “me” and “Myself” to confront the “I,” to preclude

30 Roland Hagenbuche ("Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetics of Process") cites a portion of poem 909 as representing “the relation between world and mind as a dialectical one” in the style of the Master-Slave dialectic, but he does so without providing a real analysis in relation to Hegel:

But since We hold a Mutual Disc –
And front a Mutual Day –
Which is the Despot, neither knows –
Nor Whose – the Tyranny –

I think an analysis of the above poem, one rarely commented upon by critics at all, is clearly more fruitful in demonstrating the central features of the Master-Slave dialectic as they appear in Dickinson’s work.
otherness within selfhood, means in fact risking that very dominion through the act of banishing those very adversaries: acts of banishing and subjugating are quickly transformed into acts of abdication. Thus, dialectic itself is demonstrated to be the true monarch!

This poem, however, provides another angle from which to examine the dialectic of defeat and victory within consciousness. Although one can read it almost as a straight gloss on the master-slave dialectic, the ironic understatement evident in the tone of the second stanza heightens the perceived absurdity of such a proposition (that one should be willing to stake one’s life in this manner) for one who is cast into the fray of such a conflict. First, the poem suggests, the unbearable aspects of selfhood (such as despair or, specifically in this poem, “dread,” the emotion that is the waiting for what one perceives as an inevitability), as they take shape in moments of diminishment or weakness, can be expurgated in the self’s recognition of the dialectical history of that force in relation to which that moment of weakness is articulated. However, because that force is the ultimate oppressor who would take your very life, conquering that adversary can only be achieved by standing up and facing that adversary as he is (as ultimate Force), and robbing him of his self-identity by allowing him to do what he does in this moment of his nature, which is to kill you.

Thus, the only way in which “Weakness” can pass into “Force” is through facing and coming through the open-endedness of the dialectic itself. This is, of course, because Weakness is posited in this poem as having only a relative existence, not an absolute one: it is only what it is in relation to Force. Thus, one’s own “dying,” conceived here in the second stanza in the image of the “ball” of the oppressor’s rifle “enter[ing]” the
submissive, weakened self, shifts the dialectic, “annul[ling]” within the adversary the “power to kill.” “This will pass,” one might say, “but only in death.”

The reader might also consider the entire second stanza of this poem as a metaphor for the dismemberment, or at least piercing, the self endures in order to find itself. The poem itself does not lead the reader directly into a recognition of a new self emerging from this battlefield, but we might infer that the death of the self envisioned here will in fact be justified in a new vista of resurrection, even if it is only one in which the resurrected self stands as Force, or a self-dependent consciousness, above a weakened adversary. In any case, it is reasonable to argue that for Hegel, as for Dickinson, the self as it is translated across every interval from one dialectical extreme to another does in fact suffer or endure a kind of death, and a kind of resurrection.

One might argue that Dickinson could well have done without the imagistic metaphor of the second stanza, and continued only with the philosophic-meditative language of the first stanza. However, I believe that she engages the metaphor of stanza two in order to provide a concreteness to the notion of pain and dread as it is experienced within the unhappy consciousness. Hegel’s delineation of the unhappy consciousness is truly tragicomic, which means that it does not attempt to dispense with affect or sacrifice it to some higher principle. Affect is associated most often with this stage of the development of the self in Hegel, because, arguably, it is in the moment when we first engage with ourselves as divided that we experience the first real sorrow, or the first real terror. Dickinson herself does not attempt to subjugate strongly felt emotion to an explicitly rational framework. She never allows herself to completely intellectualize
pain—but she does often use the split voice or the speaker’s perspective to suggest an order or a context through which pain might be better comprehended.

Conclusion

In short, in this chapter we have focused on a new part of the unfolding process of experience in Dickinson’s poetry, namely, the movement beyond simple consciousness into self-consciousness, and particularly the unhappy consciousness. From a reading of some paradigmatic poems, I have shown how the perceptive self moves through different layers of dialectical negation, and becomes a self-thinking subject. I have also explored what is articulated in that movement; namely, the urge to establish not only a continuous, secure framework for the self, but also the deeper underlying fluctuations that implicitly undergird this dialectical urge. The most central of these is perhaps the all-important life-and-death struggle (as in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic) that occurs on several different levels of consciousness, propelling the self-conscious subject, thus awakened, beyond itself and beyond what appears to be the relative security and yet limitation of the daily self. The self-conscious subject is thereby propelled into the dialectical drama of psychic self-identity as such, with its own challenges, negations, and limitations. Here, partial consciousness finds itself cast into a vastness that characterizes the eternal, and it becomes simultaneously a stranger to itself and yet, strangely enough, more purely spiritual in its own nature, even as it remains overawed and terrified in its partiality (as in Hegel’s further stage of the unhappy consciousness, caught between the eternal,
unchangeable and the unsatisfying condition of its own changeability and partiality). Finally, we examined the drama of the mutually-effacing action through which each pole of self-consciousness attempts to constitute itself as self-dependent, and the fear or dread implicit therein. For Dickinson, this is part of the fabric of self-consciousness itself that, as in Hegel, is not left behind in the master-slave dialectic but characterizes the essential nature of consciousness at any level. This mutually-effacing action and its attendant dread do not sacrifice the intensity of feeling to any supposed superiority of rationality. In Dickinson’s poems, feeling and thought remain part of an ongoing dialectical struggle. In the next chapter, we shall take up one of the most important but implicit features of Dickinson’s thought and poetry, namely, the role and character of the interval as such. This is not a further stage of development so much as an implicit part of consciousness that needs to be articulated, but that comes to the fore, in my view, as part and parcel of the subject as self-consciousness, namely, the deeper awareness of interval or of in-betweenness as such.

31 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, closing section on Self-Consciousness.
Chapter 5

Traversing the Interval: Dickinson’s Slants and the Rupture of Self

Having delineated the contours of Dickinson’s extraordinary vision of the growth of spirit as it becomes conscious of itself, and all of the dialectical processes that this implies, including the dialectical aspects of perception in the sense-certainty mode, the dialectic of consciousness as it confronts its own flaws and considers expelling or banishing the unruly or disruptive elements in its own nature, and the dialectic internal to absence itself, it is necessary to give some consideration to an aspect of Dickinson’s dialectics of subjectivity that I have so far only briefly touched upon. I have referred at many points to the fact that Dickinson finds, in many of the dialectical movements she charts, hints or intuitions of the transcendent. She implies in some poems (although she also seems to suggest that these are rare, privileged moments) that these intuitions insert

1 This is expressed clearly in poem 420:

You’ll know it – as you know ‘tis Noon –
By Glory –
As you do the Sun –
By Glory –
As you will in Heaven –
Know God the Father – and the Son.

By intuition, Mightiest Things
Assert themselves, - and not by terms –
“I’m Midnight” – need the Midnight say –
“I’m Sunrise” – Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –
His lisp – is Lightning – and the Sun –
His Conversation – with the Sea –
“How shall you know?”
Consult your Eye!”

As I will argue in several of the following poems, Dickinson engages the slant and the interval as a kind of receptacle for transcendence to reveal itself. As is suggested in this poem, “Omnipotence” speaks, albeit with a lisp, in the language of light—particularly “Lightning” and the “Sun.”
themselves into the dialectical drama, cutting across the soul’s landscape and thus creating or reaffirming interval as having a defining and not merely an undifferentiated character (in so far as oscillation across a horizontally-conceived interval that crosses between two poles can appear only to be a state of constant becoming and not really of difference). This element that “cuts through” is one that both prefigures and reflects the internal drama of the self as it oscillates between two poles. In some instances, it creates an axis of inference that the rational soul interrogates (both of these senses will be examined in the following pages. Ultimately, these elements that cut across the interval (which can be conceived as such an axis in itself) become moments that provoke the poet or speaker to an understanding of the necessity of an angular, indirect approach to truth itself.

In this chapter I shall first analyze a series of poems that provides a special window upon Dickinson’s varied usage of the image of the slant or angle of light (and cognate images) and then draw some preliminary conclusions from my analysis before proceeding in the latter part of the chapter to examine some important poems that highlight Dickinson’s notion of the interval. When one has a slant one already implicitly has one or more intervals that are bisected by whatever it is that slants or cuts. In the final section of the chapter these kinds of implicit intervals are given the importance they deserve (together with the explicit intervals that are not always exposed in this particular fashion).
One of Dickinson’s earliest poems probes the notion of the slant, an image that she later explores in other ways:

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –
Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the meanings, are –
None may teach it – Any –
’Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –
When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ’tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

This poem articulates Dickinson’s familiar but extraordinarily striking notion of the ephemeral, transitory, sheerly immaterial and ineffable nature of an external, “heavenly” force that impacts the deepest portion of the self. The invisible weapon that moves only
as light or shadow creates a spiritual mood, a moment in which the speaker becomes pierced by an awareness of some sort of inner separation or “internal difference.”

Many phrases in this poem are thoroughly cryptic, yet the central point is that we are given here the first of many images of a line that cuts through in an oblique fashion, in this case creating a “hurt” or pain that has no precise location. The locus of the pain is, it seems, not a locus at all, but rather a distinction, one which occurs on two levels: first, it apprises the subject implicitly of the distinction between “us” and a “heavenly” source which is the agent of the pain so described; additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it apprises the subject of an internal distinction or “difference,” which is the only “scar” (inscription?) that is left behind, the only mark that anything at all has occurred. This “internal difference,” significantly, is “Where the meanings, are,” suggesting that the slant is perhaps one that divides, sorts, and separates at the level of the subject that is immune from direct contamination by a faulty perceptive faculty, or a conflicted consciousness coming to be. This light which informs at the level of meaning also

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2 For an interesting reading of “difference” in this poem see Helen Reguiero Elam (in Arensberg, 1986), 87-88. Reguiero, in intuiting “internal difference” in other Dickinson poems as a quality that bespeaks the self’s own otherness (and thus a form of self-haunting), reads “difference” in the above poem in terms of the poem’s own otherness to itself: “The light of Winter . . . reveals to the poem the ‘internal difference’ of its own meanings, that is to say, the poem’s inability to fully utter itself. The poem cannot ‘read’ itself, gather itself together (‘None may teach it – Any - ’). It can only read itself as difference, as absence from itself.” She thus sees, in the “passing” or “passage” of light the poem’s passage through itself: “It traverses its own otherness and ‘seals’ itself in the space of its own impossibility . . . The poem that witnesses its own passage afflicts itself with the knowledge of its own abyss and ‘seals’ itself in this in-between space of consciousness from which it simultaneously sings to keep the dark away and reveals the dark the light traverses.” I think there is little evidence that “internal difference” should be read in this manner, but I agree with and consider essential the critic’s assessment that the slant itself and its passage invoke an interval and imply the notion of traversing.

James von der Heydt (The Brink of Infinity) reads “internal difference” as “the difference of the mind from itself” to conclude that “[t]ime’s double power to scar (both to create and to heal change) here ceased to operate, and ceased to guarantee the poet’s immunity from ‘seasonal’ difference, with its concomitant deathliness” (93).

3 The word “meanings” suggests the plural logos (of logas), namely, the creative principles active in the world of creation “uttered” from eternity by the creative Word (Logos) of God. These are the traces of
informs the natural domain, at the same time dissolving its concreteness in a moment of suspension: “The Landscape – listens - / The Shadows – hold their breath.” Nature submits to it, becoming passive.

There are many aspects of this poem that make it both unusually original and difficult. First, it is unusual to regard light as oppressive, having the kind of metaphysical/affective weight of music played on a pipe organ in a cathedral. This comparison invokes both the weight of religious tradition and the gravity and seriousness of the soul’s connection to the divine. The slant of light, occurring at a certain angle and no other, has the same effect.⁴ A reader might be tempted to regard the poet’s reflection here as merely a radically subjective anomaly, yet she chooses to frame it in the language of stable, objective truth, including the reader in her claims. Ultimately, however, this is not an unusual formulation of the soul’s response to divine light in philosophy and religion. This is a pain akin possibly to that of the prisoner who exits the cave and finds himself unused to the light of the sun (anagogically, the light of intelligible reality), which is really the pain of internal difference, recapitulated in the prisoner’s physical

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⁴ For another interesting take on this image, see Sherwood Anderson, who argues that this “slant” or “oblique” light is “a mocking light, like the heavenly hurt that comes from the sudden instinctive awareness of man’s lot since the Fall, doomed to mortality and irremediable suffering” (217).

In contrast, Domnhall Mitchell (Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000)) suggests that the speaker “is powerless to resist the chain of associations set in motion by the light, an internalized logic that has nothing to do with the intrinsic properties of light in itself” (242) and that this chain amounts to “cultural baggage” (244) that associates “light” with divinity: “the speaker has been taught to associate light with divinity, and it is the literalness of the vision that results in the mood of deflation and despair with which the poem ends” (244). Mitchell points further to the “discourse of violence that is also linked to institutions [of church and state] and argues that this is what the poem registers. In drawing this conclusion, Mitchell is making an historicist argument that breaks some basic rules of textual analysis. He assumes that metaphor and response to natural things often culturally associated with metaphorical meanings only emerge out of culture, imposing an untenable restriction upon what I argue is a phenomenologically internal register.
ascent out of his lifelong habitation in illusion into the world of the real. The image is also familiar in the context of Christian mystical theology, as God’s love or light wounds the soul, the first step into wholeness created in the revelation of difference.  

Finally, the image of internal difference is, perhaps, most importantly for this thesis, a revelation to consciousness of the way things are. In a Hegelian sense, this coheres with the later stages of spirit coming to consciousness of itself. Findlay sums up this aspect of Hegel’s thought and suggests that he posits first that the soul’s awareness of difference is merely one created through an awareness of its differentiation from other portions of so-called external reality. Hegel concludes, nonetheless, that this is untenable in light of the logic by which the dialectic proceeds: “It seems absurd, however, that Things without intrinsic differences should be coaxed into showing difference by their mere relations with other Things without intrinsic difference.” Hegel thus proposes as a correction, therefore, in Findlay’s view, a primary internal distinctiveness [Unterscheid] which is essential to the object, and an external diversity [Verschiedenheit] from other objects, which is an essential consequence of this. It is because things are intrinsically distinctive that they are also extrinsically

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5 Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time) notes the poem’s unconventional linking of light with death to conclude that “For Dickinson, death is the apocalyptic vision, the straightening of premonition into fact, figure without fulfillment” (102-3). In light of my phenomenological reading of Dickinson’s poetry throughout this thesis, I assert rather that death is just as significant for Dickinson as a figure of what is constantly at stake in the oscillation of the self-articulating subject between its two poles at every level of dialectic. Hegel’s insistence upon “tarrying with death” as implicit to this process is remarked upon earlier in Chapter 4.

6 Joanne Fiet Diehl (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination) reads this poem as Dickinson’s attempt to “read the meaning of light falling upon the land.” I would propose that this is less a self-constituting attempt to “read” light than it is an attempt to mark its impact, which is all the speaker is reduced to doing under the circumstances (54-5).
What Hegel seems to suggest here is that things do not in themselves reveal their distinctiveness relative to other things; things in themselves cannot merely be what they are because another thing is what it is. Hegel thus distinguishes between “intrinsic” or “internal difference” and mere extrinsic “diversity.” Hegel does not, however, postulate that a thing cannot find its distinctiveness in relation to a higher principle which is not coequal with it—spirit intuitively asserts itself to demonstrate the trajectory along which consciousness will be drawn, and this trajectory, although a dialectical oscillation, always shuffles forward and upward. Like Dickinson, he posits that internal difference is the essential condition of human spirit, is in fact the essence of Spirit. To Hegel, it is also the coming together of “the whole and its own moment,” dissolving the self’s violent vibration or oscillation between the particular and the universal that characterized its life in an earlier stage, the stage in which perception attempted to find its footing. The distinctiveness internal to the object, then (in the case of Dickinson’s poem, the subject is an object in so far as it is acted upon by a higher principle), exists even at the level of

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7 Findlay, Analysis of Sec. 124, Phenomenology of Spirit, 512. See also Hegel’s Phenomenology (Section 124): “Now, although it is true that the contradiction in the objective essence is in this way distributed among different Things, yet the difference will, for that reason, attach to the singular separated Thing itself. The different Things are thus established as existing on their own account; and the conflict between them is so far reciprocal that each is different, not from itself, but only from the other. But each is thereby determined as being itself a different Thing, and it has its essential difference in its own self; but all the while not as if this difference were an opposition in the Thing itself. On the contrary, for itself it is a simple determinateness which constitutes the Thing’s essential character, and differentiates it from others. As a matter of fact, since differennteness is present in it, it is of course necessarily present as an actual difference manifoldly constituted. But because the determinateness constitutes the essence of the Thing, by which it distinguishes itself from other Things and is for itself, this further manifold constitution is the unessential aspect. Consequently, the Thing does indeed have the twofold ‘in so far’ within its unity, but the aspects are unequal in value. As a result, this state of opposition does not develop into an actual opposition in the Thing itself, but in so far as the Thing through its absolute difference comes into a state of opposition, it is opposed to another Thing outside of it. Of course, the further manifoldness is necessarily present in the Thing too, so that it cannot be left out; but it is the unessential aspect of the Thing.”

soul, deeper than mere perception or consciousness. This internal duality at the level of soul is remarked upon by Dickinson in poem 1695:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –

Finite infinity

Here, the soul’s unity is paradoxically achieved in a moment of duplication or doubling which is nonetheless difference, establishing a privacy that is strangely “polar,” invoking if not enacting a dialectic at the level of soul. Such contradiction or opposition is implicit in the internal difference analyzed above, for here too we have an apparent separateness which is also a form of union. Difference or distinctiveness so conceived is inseparably connected with identity and vice versa.9 This idea is also rendered in Dickinson’s poem in which the soul is “attended by a single Hound – its own identity.”

The duality that Dickinson recognizes at the deepest level of soul as it grows into itself is a clear departure from Emerson, who, in positing a purely positive vision of the sublime founded in the stability and self-reliance of the individual, confidently proposes that shifts in the material landscape, some of which occur purely relative to the observer,

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only affirm our internal unity and stability.\textsuperscript{10} He thus places the source of meaning within the self (Dickinson does too in the “slant” poem, but this is evident only relative to a higher principle that reveals it and shows the subject its “internal difference”). Emerson states the following, suggesting that “spirit” (perhaps his “Oversoul”) uses nature to teach the subject that it possesses a unique integrity:

\begin{quote}
Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.

Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position, apprises us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky . . . Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt, from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprised that whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

This seems to be a rather untenable conclusion from the premises. The very nature of Emerson’s assertions demonstrates that he is considerably less troubled by evaluations of internal disruptions than Dickinson, who proposes that precisely the opposite is true—that these external changes that “alter . . . [our] position” can indeed hurt us, as they point not to the stability of the self, but to an inner duality, a duality at the soul, at the inner eye, “where the meanings are.” If what Dickinson proposes is indeed an experience of the sublime, it has an entirely different location. The soul is much more radically troubled by this experience.

The slant of light from the previous poem is modified in poem 974:

\textsuperscript{10} This is, at least, the case at one level of reading Emerson.

The Soul’s distinct connection
With immortality
Is best disclosed by Danger
Or quick Calamity –

As Lightning on a Landscape
Exhibits Sheets of Place –
Not yet suspected – but for Flash –
And Click – and Suddenness.

Here, a bolt of lightning illuminates the landscape in the same way that “danger” or “quick calamity” discloses “[t]he Soul’s distinct connection/ With immortality.” The lightning metaphor is most compelling not because it reveals a landscape that could not be seen in the full light of day, but because, it seems, it constricts the landscape in time and changes it in intensity: it exhibits “sheets of place,” marking out the human condition as a mere page in a larger drama, a “setting.” Danger or “quick Calamity” does this in apprising the soul of the limitations of its material condition as marked in mere “sheets of place,” reminding it that the apparent vastness of physical life and nature are relative. From the point of view of the divine revelatory light, all of human existence is merely a page or sheet in the fuller drama of the soul. The soul is, perhaps, secure in its identity until such light is cast upon it. At the same time, the “Flash,” “Click,” and “Suddenness” occur like the successful dialing in of a rarely heard radio frequency that signals the existence of another dimension, only to be lost a moment later. In signaling the soul’s unique or “distinct” connection with immortality, this light alters the soul’s
subjective aspect. This, too, is a moment of internal difference, marking off the soul’s identity with an immortal aspect that both “is” and “is beyond” itself, and perhaps fracturing its previous self-identity, making of its old formulation its mere image, an “other.” It is not so different from the “certain slant of light” which leaves the condition of the soul exposed.

Revelation is as much a function in both poems of the surprising flight of a light which occurred briefly as it is of light’s appearance. This is why Dickinson refers to the disappearance of the slant of light as having a clarifying quality, placing nature itself in submission. This marking of the interval in the disappearance or departure of light is taken specifically as a theme in one of Dickinson’s early poems (Johnson numbering 1714):

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite
Than by a wick that stays.
There’s something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.

Both the entry and the departure of light occur almost as a rending or cutting of a scene, making one aware of the dimension and depth of one’s experience without one becoming either immune to or overpowered by it.

The angular aspect of light is also explored in poem 375 as creating a vista on a stable scene which is transformed through the “shift” of “Seasons.” The reader who recreates the context for the poet’s image recognizes the repetitive moment of one
awakening, morning after morning, in the new light, and noting the familiar angle created by a window frame and a curtain edge from the unusual perspective of the subject lying in bed; over the course of seasons, the framing device that is composed of the triangulation of the reclining subject, the wall, and the curtain, reveals a changing yet familiar image beyond it. Dickinson could not have foreseen the technology and the effect of time-lapse photography, but this is the natural 19th-century equivalent:

    The Angle of a Landscape –
    That every time I wake –
    Between my Curtain and the Wall
    Upon an ample Crack
    Like a Venetian waiting –
    Accosts my open eye –
    Is just a Bough of Apples –
    Held slanting, in the Sky –
    The Pattern of a Chimney –
    The Forehead of a Hill –
    Sometimes – A Vane’s Forefinger –
    But that’s – Occasional –
    The Seasons – shift – my Picture –
    Upon my Emerald Bough, -
    I wake – to find no – Emeralds –
    Then – Diamonds – which the Snow
    From Polar Caskets – fetched me –
The Chimney – and the Hill –

And just the Steeple’s finger

These – never stir at all -

This poem is a little reflection on what minute differences can be discerned upon a landscape that is implicitly limited both by its frame and by the stable, albeit obliquely situated, position of the observer. The speaker is interested in the way in which the angular image furnishes the imagination. The outlines of various structures, both natural and man-made, combine in the speaker’s mind to form a picture, possibly, of a Venetian gondolier holding his shunting pole diagonally, “waiting,” perhaps, for his next customer. What turns out to be a “Bough of Apples/ Held slanting, in the Sky” is initially imagined, we presume, to be just this pole; the “Pattern of a Chimney,” the “Forehead of a Hill,” and a “Vane’s Forefinger” sometimes or “occasion[ally]” conspire to encourage this idea in the speaker, piecemeal as the construction might be. Through this frame, the speaker perceives changes in the picture created through only seasonal accretions - even these, whether leaves or snow on the slanting Bough are imagined, respectively, as “Emeralds” and, later, “Diamonds,” “fetched her” by the snow itself from “Polar” regions. These seasonal changes, as slowly occurring as we infer they are, contrast with the absolutely static nature of the other main features of the landscape, which “never stir at all.” These features—the chimney, hill, and steeple, all verticalized and reaching upward (particularly the steeple, which is deliberately built as a symbol of the human connection to the divine)—are perhaps all indications of the stability and permanence of the transcendent in comparison to the “shifts” of perspective occasioned in the natural world.
In any case, this poem, in invoking the angle and the slant, recapitulates the duality of the self as it peers, with the assistance of the dawning light which awakens and enables it, obliquely beyond its own domain upon a landscape divided by the changing world of nature and the unchanging reflections of the transcendent. In gazing upon both—the changing world of nature and the symbolic reflections of an eternal and unchangeable transcendent realm—across an unchanging interval of space, at regular intervals of time, the speaker or subject is compelled into a meditation on the nature and the scope of reality. One might argue, however, that such a meditation could be effected much more fruitfully from a different point of view, perhaps one in which the observer places herself in the midst of the scene, able to gaze with 360-degree vision. However, as is shown to be the case in the poems we have so far examined in this chapter, immersion in the fullness of material reality is not in itself sufficient to educate the self about its own nature, or about the nature of the world in which it must exist. If it were, then lightning and other angular approaches or slants of light could not possibly add anything to one’s understanding. As we know from our own experience, light, especially oblique, indirect, or late day or early morning light, provides a fullness of dimension to the world that does

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12 This view is echoed by Barton Levi St. Armand (Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984)), who argues that in this poem, Dickinson, in reflecting a traditionally Romantic sensibility, is “more passive patron than active artist”: “Outer nature becomes a veil of phenomenality that demands constant watching by the cautious observer. . . [Dickinson] realizes the dangers of lifting the veil and remains satisfied with an oblique angle of vision” (223–4).

13 Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time) takes a somewhat different, although convincing view, arguing that landscapes in Dickinson are “generally symbolic . . . bearers of more meaning than a given speaker can interpret (as in ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’)” (5). She continues, “Thus the horizon [for Dickinson] is an especially beguiling landscape, because the infinite transformations to which it is subject hint at an ultimate disclosure, the lurking of something behind the visible to which it will shortly give way.” This I do agree with, but I argue that the angle or the oblique line of sight that cuts across or through things in this poem, and which is employed at intervals, is particularly important for Dickinson in winnowing out what are merely accretions in the phenomenal landscape, and what are constants.
not exist in the regular flatness of overhead sunlight.\textsuperscript{14} Ultimately, then, in this poem, the speaker registers the simultaneous contraction and expansion of perception enabled by both the repetition of vision over regular intervals of time and the limitation of the angular frame of reference.\textsuperscript{15}

In poem 910, Dickinson once again engages the notion of the slant or angle, this time in the process of affirming a phenomenological, rather than merely rational, encounter with the world:

Experience is the Angled Road

Preferred against the Mind

By - Paradox - the Mind - itself -

Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite - How Complicate

The Discipline of Man -

Compelling Him to Choose Himself

His Preappointed Pain -

Here, the “angle” or slant is the indirect path the subject prefers to take “against the Mind,” meaning either or all of the following: 1) \textit{in spite of} the Mind’s wishes to control

\textsuperscript{14} The poet's interest in the obliqueness of light and its angular approach is nothing new within the context of Romantic visual art. Whether one considers the paintings of Turner, Ruskin, or the German Romantics, one notes in particular the obsession with light as it is angularly diffused or refracted, but rarely directly illuminative. St. Armand specifically connects Dickinson to Ruskin’s theory of art in “Lone Landscapes: Dickinson, Ruskin, and Victorian Aesthetics” in \textit{Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

\textsuperscript{15} These sorts of unusual angles in these poems belie even the possibility of a single 360-degree vision or of an uncomplicated microscopic certainty (as in Chapter 1) and point to the indirect, \textit{sudden} intrusion of transfixing perspective that does not permit us to readily pinpoint or pigeon-hole the source and leaves us rather with a sense of restless discomfort in the moment of recognition.
or mediate the subject’s path or knowledge; 2) *instead of* the Mind, in which case the
“Angled Road” is inferred to be the opposite path to the path of the mind, leading us to conclude that the mind’s path is direct and perhaps rational and logical in a conventional sense. A third option is that “against” in line 2 indicates not only the preferred direction of the subject, but also the *map across which that angle cuts*—in this case, the map being the mind itself, and experience being the road that cuts obliquely across or “against” it.

The reader is led into some problems related to the syntax of line 3 when read against or in concert with lines 1 and 2. Either 1) “Paradox” itself is what prefers “experience” and thus the angled road against the imposition of rationality and its laws, knowing that the “Mind” in its linearity or limitation cannot in fact endure or resolve paradox all on its own and thus will be stymied in its normal practice of ordering and making sense of the world, or 2) in an alternate reading in which “By – Paradox” refers solely to the “Mind itself” in its presumption that *it leads* the self in the apprehension of the world; in this case the mind’s presumption that it (rationality), and not experience, is what leads is in itself a paradox (although in what sense this possible misapprehension could be considered a true paradox is unclear). Most likely, “Paradox” is the real subject from which the grammar of the poem proceeds, choosing or preferring the angled road of experience over or across the landscape of the mind, perhaps inferring or discerning that it is only in experience that its (paradox’s) own being can be affirmed, that the conjunction of “is” and “is not” finds a home in experience, in the indirect approach, in the cutting across, and is not in the process wished away, dissolved, or resolved in an artificial manner. In this sense, this poem is one in which dialectic itself (in so far as Paradox is a form of dialectic) chooses the path of its own survival.16

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16 Sharon Cameron (*Lyric Time*) argues that the “distinctions [in this poem] are so coiled that it is difficult
This poem makes a further observation about Mind, one which seemingly contradicts other suppositions made in other poems about the scope and ability of Mind (for instance, in poem 1323 taken up in Chapter 4 in which it is suggested that a subject possesses more than one kind or locus of mind). Here the mind, which thinks or “presumes” that it can lead Paradox all on its own, is wrong to think so; the matter is, in fact, “Quite Opposite” because, as I have noted above, the mind cannot lead Paradox in any usual sense because it must double itself in order to do so. This is why Paradox is a subject here which makes mind an object it traverses in its excursions. Stanza 2 of the poem is nonetheless problematic in other senses, but appears to be an objective meditation on mind’s simultaneous willingness to lead yet its inadequacy to do so. The speaker notes, “How complicate[d is]/ The Discipline of Man,” referring presumably to the discipline of the mind and its laws, including the discipline it must impose on itself in following, or becoming a mere object for complications of thought itself, rather than leading. The speaker sympathetically observes that this particular desire to lead, to order the excursion of paradox, ironically leads him to choose only his own “pain.” This idea casts the reader back into the reflections in Chapter 4 regarding the unhappy consciousness.

Dickinson’s famous poem 1129, finally, also uses “slant” as a method of “Tell[ing] all the Truth,” and in the process the speaker connects the idea of the oblique circuit to the image of light—in this case, once again, lightning:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -

Success in Circuit lies

to understand them,” resulting in “speech that is almost unintelligible” (37). While I agree that the options are almost bewildering, I think that a determined reader can work his or her way through to a reasonable, if provisional conclusion.
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man, be blind -

In this poem the speaker reflects upon a law of mediation. Whereas the poet’s previous observations about light were all dramas related to an unmediated experience of the transcendent, here she implicitly invokes a new distinction—not merely one between the source of light and the subject upon which light is cast, but between said subject and an intermediary who must portion out the light, or “Truth,” so that the recipient is not cast into blindness by its intensity; perhaps in “slant[ing]” it, in creating a longer trajectory for it, some of its projective force is dissipated. The speaker proposes that this is an accommodation that must be made to potential weaknesses in two faculties of the human person, the faculty of “Delight” and the faculty of sight which is inadequate to the fullness of truth directly rendered.

The supposition lying at the back of this poem is that there is someone, perhaps the speaker, who possesses this truth in its fullness, and who knows enough about the force of truth to portion it out carefully. This suggests, perhaps, when we take this poem in concert with the others in this chapter, that there are two kinds of people: those who need to and do see this dazzling truth as directly as they may, and who have become blind in doing so (or have become blind to do so), and the rest, namely, those others, who need
not and should not suffer the kind of sacrifice necessary to see it directly. Perhaps the poet designates herself here as the agent who knows the proper method—the requisite “slant”—for disseminating the truth. This reading coheres with my reading of the poet’s vision as set out in the section on self-renunciation, particularly where she claims, “I fit for them - I seek the dark.”

Dickinson’s varied usage of “slants” of light and also of the angled road, of paradox and the manifestation of truth, therefore, shows several important features of her thought: first, it shows her subtle awareness of the utterly disorienting and yet transfixing irruption of the transcendent that does not follow the trajectories of ordinary experience but punctures them from a perspective which is entirely other; second, it shows that in puncturing ordinary experience, the irruptive transcendent renders incapable one’s convenient separation of normal ordering faculties of the human being such as mind. However, it also simultaneously signals to the subject the usefulness of deliberately limiting one’s frame of perception in the approach to truth and of employing an oblique perspective which replicates the transcendent’s own trajectory. Here the subject replicates in its own self-adjustment a kind of receptive adequateness appropriate to the growth or maturation of spirit. This discussion of these images and the conclusions we have drawn from them are expanded and developed in the section on renunciation in

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17 For a different focus on the notion of the “slant,” see Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet*. In discussing Dickinson’s use of semantic contrasts, she argues that this is precisely the case. Beginning with Dickinson’s notion of telling truth “slant,” she proposes that in Dickinson’s “poetic theory and practice there is not only reverence before the comprehensible, but also an effort to view it as closely as possible and from as many angles as can be done. To this end she employs the technique of slantness as an especially useful method” (104). Lindberg-Seyersted identifies paradox and “juxtaposition of words belonging to different vocabularies or to different etymological or other linguistic categories, through metaphors, and through antitheses.”

18 This kind of limited dissemination of light as a poetic vocation, one which again distinguishes between the mediator who sacrifices her own vision and the recipient, who can enjoy “all” truth in a form accommodated to his or her weak perception, is also rendered in poem 833: “The Poets light but lamps -/ Themselves go out.”
Chapter 6 in which the subject already appropriates these principles of re-adjustment as its starting point. Third, and finally, this analysis shows that the indirect or oblique approach to light or truth, rather than any immediate manifestation, requires the human being to traverse the indirect interval or refraction of truth in consciousness itself; although divine light might be immediate or without interval in itself, human consciousness is not, but it nonetheless moves in such a way that it is open to the indirect perforation of the transcendent.

**Dickinson’s Intervals**

Dickinson’s intervals,¹⁹ both implicit and explicit, can be regarded as recapitulating her entire dialectics of subjectivity. The interval in her poetry can be considered in a few important ways: first, it might be regarded as the space between opposing poles of dialectic, whether that dialectic is one which is evident and comes into being in perception and the sense-certainty mode²⁰; or whether it is one which, in committing herself to one pole of the dialectic, the speaker becomes conscious of as a

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¹⁹ The “interval” is an ancient notion important in Patristic thought. For Gregory of Nyssa (4th Century) “‘interval’ (diastema) is nothing other than creation;” it is a receptacle or spacing for things to come to be; yet at the same time, it “denotes a particular form of nonidentity, that of the material world” (translation and quotations from Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought. An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 27-36). The double notion of interval and spacing therefore goes back to Plato’s *Chora* or the space in which things come to be from the *Timaeus* (52a-d). Dickinson’s treatment of the interval can therefore be situated generally in this tradition, but it is worth noting—that I shall not deal with it here—that this is also part of the root of Derrida’s and Kristeva’s usage of the term “espacement” or spacing as an alternative for difference. Difference, Derrida writes: “is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. [It] is the systematic play of differences, of traces of difference, of the spacing by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production…of intervals without which the ‘full’ terms could not signify” (cited in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), 97). Dickinson’s usage predates in its own way this modern usage. For Kristeva see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 173-5.

²⁰ This implicit interval can be discerned in the poem “Perception of an object - costs -,” which I dealt with extensively in Chapter 2. Here, the interval occurs between “object” and “Object,” in so far as the speaker, in “gain[ing]” one, pays a price or “cost.”
distance across which the Absolute recedes.\textsuperscript{21} There is, however, another less evident interval in the “perception” poem which operates conceptually, one created in a dialectic of absence that is inferred within the small-o “object” itself and has come into being in the commitment to the “object” in preference to the “Object”; this new dialectic, and thus the new interval, is created between the “object” and the inadequacy projected onto it by the speaker. In any case, the interval which the perceiving consciousness regards metaphorically as distance, is one which at this stage (the stage of problematic perception) cannot be overcome, leaving the subject frustrated. Nonetheless, the subject both idealizes the distanced aspect and constitutes or defines itself in relation to this higher ideal; the interval, the perceived distance, thus becomes a trajectory of desire. Indeed, the very forms of Dickinson’s poems are framed as intervals between concept-fragments or sentences, absences that disappear, ambiguities that tease, and negations that negate or subvert, all of which frustrate the desire for easy or complete comprehension. A 360-degree vision, as we noted in the previous chapter, is virtually mocked by such presentation or, alternatively, is recapitulated as a folding-back upon itself that disorients the attempted straightforward vision.

In light of the preceding sense of the interval, we might consider poem 258, “There’s a certain slant of light,” as a thesis supporting the notion that an interval can be exposed or created by a transcendent function, not as such a function is inferred (as in the “perception” poem), but as it actively penetrates to illuminate an internal dividedness in a consciousness or soul that may have rested in some self-satisfied certainty of its inner unity and sufficiency. In this case, the interval is one simultaneously of time, space (both materially conceived), and metaphorical distance. In time, it begins with the movement

\textsuperscript{21}Again, as in the poem “Perception of an object costs,” perception both “sets it fair” and “situates so far.”
of light, likely through an aperture, until it rests briefly in a “certain slant” (the light itself perhaps having moved as the sweep of the hands of a clock) and ends with the dislocation of that angle into another (the speaker refers to “when it goes”), or perhaps out of the range of vision altogether. In space, it is the distance occupied by what the speaker identifies as that particular “slant,” or shaft, or heft. In metaphysical or existential terms, the interval is the space between the two poles of self marked now by “internal difference.” Arguably, it is this interval which implicitly existed as internal difference that cut through these two poles, recreating a painful self-doubling which is nonetheless difference.

**The Interval “Overcome” (Stoicism (and Skepticism))**

The notion of the interval is also represented conceptually in poem 305, where as in the previous poems it is marked as a space created in difference and distinction, in the in-between of two poles, in this case two extreme emotions, designated as concepts (i.e., definitions):

The Difference between Despair

And Fear - is like the One

Between the instant of a Wreck -

And when the Wreck has been -

The Mind is smooth - no Motion -

Contented as the Eye

Upon the Forehead of a Bust -
That knows - it cannot see -

In its simplest aspect, this is a definition poem, in which two terms, “Despair” and “Fear” are differentiated in relation to each other. Arguably, the definition is found in the “between” itself, in the interval across which one is transformed into the other (one might suppose, if we are to regard this as a temporal progression, that this occurs in one direction, from fear to despair, as suggested in the analogy to the history of the wreck). Difference, as interval, is conceived in lines 3-4 as a span of time that occurs between an effect and a result. The central subject—the ship itself that is wrecked—is conspicuously absent, negated by its past and its destruction, leading the reader to simultaneously engage with and disengage from this historical aspect, forcing her to withdraw in a peculiar way from the analogy which is supposed to lend concrete substance and cast herself instead into a merely conceptual meditation (arguably, this is what the poem itself is about—a state of consciousness that suspends itself above realities and disturbances, reducing them to mere concepts). Nonetheless, in invoking this difference in the status of the missing wreck—the difference between its annihilation and the realization of its annihilation—the speaker seems to refer to the “difference” as occurring in the interval in which the event has been appropriated to consciousness. If so, what really is this state of consciousness? First we are told in the launching of the analogy of lines 3-4, cryptically, that it is like “the One.” Undoubtedly, we are to regard this phrase also (but not only) as part of the grammar of the lines following, but set off as it is at the end of line 2, and

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22 Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time) astutely notes that the terms of the first line, “despair” and “fear,” are “presented in inverse order from those of the initial comparison” (i.e., despair apparently is associated with the “instant of the wreck,” and fear with “when the wreck has been”). This is seemingly problematic, but I would argue that it could be regarded as an ancillary bugbear that loses its significance within the context of the mind that has already cast itself above this interval in its Stoic attitude, an attitude I will explore as operating in the following pages.
capitalized, we may also regard it as the “One” or oversoul of Neoplatonism, the source of divine mind and individual soul, emanations which reach down into mattered experience.\textsuperscript{23} In this sense, the “One,” and thus this differentiating interval between two states, is to be regarded as perhaps absolute, undifferentiated unity as it inserts itself into the history of the subject.

If the One is the interval, or the “between” that differentiates despair from fear, and if it renders the relationship of individual consciousness to anxiety in its different complexions, what does this consciousness as it is a reflection of the One really look like? In stanza 2, we learn that the Mind is not captured in a quivering dialectic of difference here, but rather is “smooth,” exhibiting “no motion.” This is the case, it seems, because in some sense it has already cast itself beyond the horizontal oscillation, behaving as the One, the source of intelligibility, which is like the eye “Upon the Forehead of a Bust,” invoking not the Cyclops but the “third eye” of the intelligible realm that can countenance the One. The mental reconstruction that the reader is forced to undergo of the poet’s image of this third eye substantiates this reading. The single eye on a forehead of a bust is situated, presumably, both between and above the two sensually perceiving eyes on the face of the bust. Clearly extraneous to the physical vision of the two eyes so situated, this third eye could only exist to represent a vision without vision. It is also suspended above the dialectic of the two physical eyes, which employ each other to capture depth and dimension in the natural world. This Mind in the interval is “contented” in its independence of vision; it cannot “see” only in the material sense, and thus possesses knowledge of the superfluity of the dialectic.

\textsuperscript{23} See Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 72-90.
So why all of this strangeness? Why invoke distinctions in affect only to conclude in this seemingly abstract and ephemeral manner? Dickinson likely intended to explore yet another state of consciousness in the phenomenological revolution of the subject. This could be what Stoicism looks like in relation to dialectics of consciousness that attempt to give names to categories of affect, even dimensions of affect that begin and end in negativity. Hegel, in the section of the *Phenomenology* called “Freedom of Self-Consciousness,” designates Stoicism as

[t]his freedom of self-consciousness when it appear[s] as a conscious manifestation in the history of Spirit . . . Its principle is that consciousness is a being that *thinks*, and that consciousness holds something to be essentially important, or true and good only in so far as it *thinks* it to be such. . .

There is something in Stoicism, then, as Hegel conceives it, that stands in the dialectical interval, and exercises the freedom of its own judgment; differences are now posited “in the pure movement of thinking” (199). The freedom marked here occurs because the consciousness no longer regards experiences as demonstrating difference *from itself*, but only difference *through* its own thought; thought here is unified with consciousness, giving consciousness a belief in its independent character. Hegel continues:

Self-will is the freedom which entrenches itself in some particularity and is still in bondage, while Stoicism is the freedom which always comes directly out of bondage and returns into the pure universality of thought. As a universal

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form of the World-Spirit, Stoicism could only appear on the
scene in a time of universal fear and bondage, but also a time
of universal culture which had raised itself to the level of
thought.  

Dickinson’s poem reflects many aspects of this definition. This is not a poem like
Dickinson’s poems on pain which I discussed in Chapter 4. If we compare Dickinson’s
poem “The Difference between Despair – and Fear” with a poem such as “Pain has an
element of Blank,” we are compelled to acknowledge the difference between the
abstraction of mere blankness in which the “mind” as such has altogether been made
irrelevant or insufficient (or, as in other poems on pain, in which mind is a mere object or
receptacle that is or becomes the site of repetitive motions or simultaneous contraction
and expansion), and the “smooth,” motionless, “contented” Mind that evaluates or creates
difference out of its own thought. The poem also confirms Hegel’s assertion about the
emergence of the Stoic impulse in a time of fear.

Hegel nonetheless goes on to assert the limitations of Stoicism for a
consciousness that reaches for truth which has real, living content outside of what its own
thought gives to it. Such a consciousness seeking real truth attempts to posit its
independence, but it does not foresee the illusion it generates as it merely absorbs
potential otherness, temporarily dissolving a dialectic within consciousness:

Freedom in thought has only pure thought as its truth, a
truth lacking the fullness of life. Hence, freedom in

\[25\] Hegel, Section 199, Phenomenology of Spirit, 121.

\[26\] Hegel does suggest, however, that this positing of independent consciousness in Stoicism can exist as a
precursor to the negative aspects of the master and slave relationship.
thought, too, is only the notion of freedom, not the living reality of freedom itself. For the essence of that freedom is at first only thinking in general, the form as such [of thought], which has turned away from the independence of things and returned into itself . . . But . . . the notion as an abstraction cuts itself off from the multiplicity of things . . . Stoicism, therefore, was perplexed when it was asked for what was called a ‘criterion of truth as such,’ i.e., strictly speaking, for a content of thought itself . . . The True and the Good, wisdom and virtue, the general terms beyond which Stoicism cannot get, are therefore in a general way no doubt uplifting, but since they cannot in fact produce any expansion of the content, they soon become tedious.  

In light of these insights, then, the poem in question becomes a reflection on an inadequate solution to, resolution to, or escape from the potential pain of dialectic. The consciousness seeks freedom by thinking, and by creating distinctions in thought; it even does so by way of metaphor and analogy (in this way the poem both replicates and metapoetically reflects upon consciousness at this stage); that this attempt is successful from the point of view of consciousness as it desires independence in notioning, and so controlling difference in thought and definition, is evident in a dialectic which is suspended or seemingly transcended without effacing or confounding Mind. However, this freedom in abstraction is also a freedom from the real, which is prefigured in the final line of the poem, in which the said Mind is like the third eye, the One, but perhaps  

27 Hegel, Section 200, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 122.
not at all these things and not adequate to their functions; rather, it is vaguely aware of its preliminary foreclosure or forestalling of real vision: it “knows – it cannot see.” Thus, in relation to this poem, interval becomes a moment of difference created by differentiation in thought; it is abstract and devoid of meaningful diversity even as it temporarily enables freedom of self-consciousness.\(^{28}\)

Of course, at least one other more complex reading of the poem is possible in this light, for the “smooth” mind, the mind free from disturbance and composed of smooth Democritean-Epicurean atoms is not only the Stoic mind, but the numbed mind, or, indeed, the mind into which the Stoic mind passes immediately, according to Hegel. That is, the Skeptic mind that refuses to posit the reality of a tragic world but annuls that world and thus remains undisturbed in the midst of maelstrom.\(^{29}\) For Hegel, “Skepticism is the realization of that of which Stoicism was only the Notion, and is the actual experience of what the freedom of thought is.”\(^{30}\) Whereas Stoicism posits positively, Skepticism is the negative side of that positing—and for both, “contentment” or ataraxia in the environment of fear and despair is the outcome. As Hegel puts it, “What

\(^{28}\) Suzanne Juhasz (The Undiscovered Continent) provides a somewhat similar reading of this aspect of the poem: “Such an eye would be smooth and motionless, but its ‘contentment’ would be a negative virtue: the cessation of struggle in the face” (37).

\(^{29}\) This element of lack of disturbance is evident in poem 859, “A Doubt if it Be Us,” but this poem makes clear what is at stake, what is lost in the moment of suspension that comforts:

A doubt if it be Us  
Assists the staggering Mind  
In an extremer Anguish  
Until it footing find.

An Unreality is lent,  
A merciful Mirage  
That makes the living possible  
While it suspends the lives

See full discussion of this poem in Chapter 4, note 11.

\(^{30}\) Hegel, Section 202, Phenomenology of Spirit, 123.
Skepticism causes to vanish is not only objective reality as such” (that Stoicism itself achieves notionally) “but its own relationship to it . . .”31 Both the faces of Stoicism and Skepticism have that quality of frozen contentment in an epoch of turmoil represented in the faces of late ancient busts and statues that Dickinson captures in the final stanza of the poem above.32

**The Interval Transformative**

I would like briefly to revisit a poem I analyzed extensively in Chapter 4 (Beyond Perception) for its particular contribution to the notion of the interval. We witnessed earlier, in poem 822 (“This Consciousness that is aware”), the idea that the interval is indeed a transformative space, not merely an undifferentiated gap, across which consciousness itself develops:

>This Consciousness that is aware

31 Hegel, Section 204, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 124.

32 See also Dickinson’s beautiful poem 1413:

Sweet Skepticism of the Heart –
That knows - and does not know –
And tosses like a Fleet of Balm –
Affronted by the snow –
Invites and then retards the Truth
Lest Certainty be sere
Compared with the delicious throe
Of transport thrilled with Fear –

This poem may seem opposed, however slightly, to the above interpretation, but the adjective “sweet” and the noun “balm” evoke a similar vision, for Skepticism in Hegel is an oscillation or dizzying medley that nonetheless remains untroubled, but that becomes, together with its immediate partner, Stoicism, in the next section the troubled poles of the explicitly, non-serene unhappy consciousness that lives out the oscillating reality of Stoicism’s and Skepticism’s positive-negative positing.

Christopher Benfey (*Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*) reads this poem as a “fairly typical expression of [the] relation between scepticism and the sublime” in the mode of “Burke or Schiller or Kant [for whom] the limits of our senses do not preclude a certain thrilling awareness of what eludes or transcends their grasp” (13). I would argue that this poem is truly skeptic in the Hegelian sense because the “Heart” in the poem has not fully descended into an awareness of what is at stake in its coy game—that is, there is no serious sense in this poem in which it could be said that the speaker is at all concerned with what “eludes or transcends” her grasp. The Heart is only marginally concerned that the truth will be “sere,” or dry.
Of Neighbors and the Sun

Will be the one aware of Death

And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval

Experience between . . .

The interval here is not just the gap between opposing poles of a quivering dialectic, but perhaps the exit out of the dialectic into a new one. Consciousness “traverses” the interval; it moves across it, but we are not told whether this occurs directly (i.e., from one pole to the other) or transversely (if it were transverse, it would make this movement another slant). As the consciousness of the mundane differentiations of existence (neighbors and the sun) is somehow transformed (“will become [another] one”) into a consciousness capable of grasping non-being (death) by traversing this interval, the interval becomes implicitly defined as a transformative space, perhaps like Kristeva’s *chora*, (Kristeva, like Derrida in his own work *Chora*, borrows from Plato’s *Timaeus* to “denote an essentially motile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases.” Plato’s notion of *chora* is probably much more in tune with Dickinson’s intervals as they are thematically explored in the poetry: *chora*

33 For an alternative reading see Helen Regueiro Elam(“Dickinson and the Haunting of the Self”) who, in my view, misreads important aspects of the first two stanzas; first, she does not read “will be” as marking a statement about becoming, and thus of transformation, but regards it essentially as analogous to “is,” as a mark of the sameness of the consciousness that is aware of neighbors, the sun, and death; second, she does not read “[e]xperience between” as an indication that experience *is* the interval, as I do, but suggests that there is an interval implied “between experience and most profound experiment” (96-7); she nonetheless concludes that what is revealed here is an “interval in the self” (a premise with which I agree) but she regards this interval as “an interruption in which consciousness sees itself and its own abyss” (97). I see in this poem, more than in any other, not interruption but transformative oscillation.

is “the space in which the universe comes to reside.” In the *Timaeus* (52b-c), Plato regards it as a space

which exists always and cannot be destroyed. It provides

a fixed site for all things that come to be. It is itself apprehended

by a kind of bastard reasoning that does not involve sense

perception, and it is hardly even an object of conviction. We

look at it as in a dream when we say that everything that

exists must of necessity be somewhere, in some place and

occupying some space.\(^{35}\)

The *chora* also has the quality of a “wetnurse of becoming” that, in taking on the

character of those elements that fill it, “but because it is filled with powers that are

neither similar nor evenly balanced, no part of it is in balance. It sways irregularly in

every direction as it is shaken by those things . . . as they are moved, they drift

continually, some in one direction and others in others, separating from one another.”\(^{36}\)

In Dickinson’s poem, “This [mundane] consciousness” is winnowed out, the interval

being the space across which it becomes or “will be” a different consciousness, one more

capable of apprehending both being and absence.

**The Interval Transformed: Christ in the Gap**

Dickinson also uses the term “interval” explicitly in poem 924:

> Love – is that later Thing than Death –

> More previous – than Life –

\(^{35}\) Quoted in Noelle McAffee, *Julia Kristeva*, 19.

\(^{36}\) Plato, *Timaeus* 52d-53a.
Confirms it – at its entrance – And
Usurps it - of itself –

Tastes Death – the first – to hand the sting
The Second – to its friend –
Disarms the little interval –
Deposits Him with God –

Then hovers – an inferior Guard –
Lest this Beloved Charge
Need – once in an Eternity –
A smaller than the Large –

This is perhaps one of Dickinson’s most difficult poems, partly because of its unsettled syntax that makes pronoun reference and conditional phrase assignations difficult. This seems to be about the divine redemption of a fallen world and the process by which this occurs from the access point of Spirit itself. First, the reader is presented with a linear time-line in which we see, from left to right (past to present, which, as I will suggest, may be an altogether artificial imposition): love—life—interval—death—love. We need to consider this timeline in both a historical sense, and in an eternally processing sense in something of the following way. First, historically, the picture we perceive is this: love, as the motive force of the divine, precedes creation itself. In “confirm[ing] it” (life) “at its entrance,” God brings the world into being through Love, and through the Word
(“First was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”\textsuperscript{37}). God “confirms” life at its entrance both by forming it and affirming its goodness (“It is good”). In affirming creation through the word and love, love and the word usurp life of itself, and life (world, nature) becomes a manifestation of Spirit. In the usurpation of life, love and the word hem death in on both sides, as love is already simultaneously positioned after death. Next, death is assaulted; the paradox of the incarnated Christ and his dual nature is movingly captured in two phrases; first, love “tastes Death,” invoking the suffering of the fully human Christ (the second function of the “friend”\textsuperscript{37})); second, and simultaneously, Love (Christ, the Word) “hand[s] the sting,” invoking Christ’s mastery of death in his divinity. This is a reversal of the sting that death delivers in the fallen world prior to redemption.\textsuperscript{38}

Finally, love “disarms the little interval” that stands between the two major dramas pictured or figured here: the drama of Christ’s life which reorganizes creation and infuses the universe with the primordial love in which it was originally cast, and the drama of Christ’s death and resurrection. What, then, is the “little interval” that is disarmed, “deposited[ed] with God,” and henceforth watched over by an “inferior Guard”\textsuperscript{38}? It could only be the space of death in the human world or, alternatively, the human life sunk in the possibility of death, the receptacle of non-being, the receptacle of death which swallows up life, the human grave, disarmed and transformed into a receptacle for the eternal life, the tomb literally “deposited with God” in the figure of Christ, which is the

\textsuperscript{37} See John 1:1

\textsuperscript{38} See 1 Corinthians 15: 54-56 (KJV): “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.”
manifestation of divine love. This usurpation of the interval is most interesting perhaps because it marks a change in a space that previously defined the limits of finite concepts (life and death). It transforms the interval from a horizontally-defined, limited dimension to a vertically-defined, infinite one. The interval becomes a portal that literally crosses its own horizontal history. The irony and yet the completion of this drama is also figured in the nature of the “thing” that the interval has now come to contain. In being deposited with God (in so far as the body of Christ is placed in the tomb), it is the space in which the mystery of the resurrection occurs; the evidence of the nature of what is deposited there is the disappearance of that very thing—the body of Christ. Thus, any guard placed at the entrance of that interval is indeed an inferior one, as long as it is meant to guard the material content of what is placed there. Nothing can prevent Spirit from returning to itself in an absolute form.

The major premise of Christianity is that sin and death need have no dominion over the individual human soul. The divine drama that unfolds outside of time and the human one that unfolds within it intersect in this poem, and in Christian theology. Although Christ escapes the tomb in his resurrection and death is destroyed, the human drama continues to unfold, and the salvation of individual souls remains still a personal drama requiring the motive force of love and the willing acceptance of Christ. The poem ends with the figure of Love hovering eternally at the interval, perhaps in the possibility

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39 This is, in some sense, an explicit example of what Phillip Stambovsky is perhaps referring to in his discussion of Resurrection as a mode of the sensus numinis in so far as it is a double negation. Stambovsky claims that this is operative in Dickinson as a pattern in other poems: “Dickinson makes explicit the sense of a continuous ‘resurrection’—one that pours from the heavenly abode . . . in a dialectic whose operative principle is what Hegel called ‘determinate negation.’ The negative moments—night, larceny, death—determine the actualization and character of the positive—morning, legacy, immortality . . . Resurrection is the negation of negation, a sublimation of night, larceny, and death that, rather than deny or ignore or belittle, affirms their negative power in the salvific determinations—the redeeming grace—of morning, legacy, and immortality” (148) (in Philosophical Conceptualization and Literary Art: Inference, Ereignis, and Conceptual Attunement to the Work of Poetic Genius).
that it will be needed by “this Beloved Charge,” a humanity to which God has been restored. This is a fulfillment, or furnishing, of the finite with the infinite. In approaching and correcting history, love also effaces, translates, and circumscribes history.

**Conclusion**

What I have tried to uncover in this chapter is the following. First, I explore the intriguing logical and metaphysical connection between slants, angles, and the indirect irruption of the transcendent in the life of consciousness, on the one hand, and the interval that consciousness must traverse as a result of the implications this has for a dialectics of subjectivity in Dickinson’s poetry. Second, I have identified three important valences that one can trace in Dickinson’s poetry for understanding the traversable interval more deeply: the interval “overcome” but only as an illusion or disengagement of the subject; the interval transformative, which designates interval as the space across which legitimate maturation of consciousness can occur; and the interval transformed, which suggests the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical that effectively liberates, or prefigures the liberation of, the subject from the constraint of a purely horizontal dialectic in the mystery of the incarnation and the resurrection. This last sense of interval, as a complete rupturing of human existence, returns in a way to the slants of light that prefigure dimly this possibility and the fuller movement of subjectivity we shall examine in Chapter 6. The major findings of this chapter seem to me to be absolutely crucial for understanding Dickinson’s poetry. Not only do they genuinely illuminate the complex nature of dialectic at every level and the inherent plausible skepticism of Dickinson
herself, exposed in the context of the doubleness of consciousness, but also her religious confidence in the midst of such experiences transfixed by the transcendent and redeemed by the mystery of grace and divine life. They are also crucial because they predicate the insufficiency of states of being that foreclose or too rigidly circumscribe the nature of truth, because these states also prefigure, however dimly, more developed aspects of subjectivity in which consciousness willingly, or even reluctantly, readjusts its vision or perspective, carefully paring away what is extraneous to its real subjectivity, in order to access truth in its fuller dimensions. In the next chapter on soul, spirit, subjectivity, and self-renunciation I shall begin by charting out the poet’s representations of soul as it either obscures or reveals itself at different stages of development and articulate some of the more developed features of this as consciousness bridges the interval between soul and spirit.
Chapter 6

The Nature and Function of the Soul in Relation to Human Subjectivity

I have not commented much upon Dickinson’s use of the word soul beyond remarking that (among other things) soul is not the entirely invulnerable, immortal substance or essence it is often, in the ancient and medieval worlds, taken to be. For Dickinson, as we have seen, the dialectic of soul in the move from consciousness to self-consciousness is a troubled, unsettling experience full of vulnerability. At the same time, Dickinson never seems to lose sight of the other pole of dialectical consciousness, namely, the intimation of immortality and infinity. Part of the heritage of the ancient and medieval worlds would suggest an amalgam of different views, perhaps not fully separable one from the other: soul as the animating principle of the body; soul as an immortal substance in its own right (Plato); soul as proceeding from and returning to Intellect and the One (Neoplatonism); a World Soul animating the world of which our “souls” are in some sense parts (from Plato onwards) or an “All Souls” of which our souls are parts (Christian); a transmigratory soul in the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition through which, in some sense, our “souls” are linked to the “souls” of other animals and plants. The variety of options is overwhelming and, worse, by the end of the Renaissance different views seem to blur into each other so that we cannot always—or at all—distinguish one from the other. Perhaps what I can say, however, is that Dickinson stands at a pivotal juncture between earlier traditions, particularly the Christian (mystical) tradition, as I have argued, and modernity, and nowhere more so perhaps than in her complex view of dialectical subjectivity in which earlier notions of “soul” appear to be subsumed. Perhaps I can even go further and posit that in Dickinson’s poetry we can see
the development and emergence of a new modern, fluctuating view of subjectivity within which earlier perspectives on soul and cognate terms play their part but become transformed. In this chapter I shall first explore the relation between soul and subjectivity, then take up the important but in my view overlooked perspectives of self-limitation and self-renunciation (related to the notion of subjective re-adjustment articulated in the previous chapter) and finally analyze the crucial vertical perspective of dialectical subjectivity that is so easily dismissed or diminished. Again, I shall use Hegelian dialectic to illustrate or compare what I mean, particularly in the final section, in which I examine Hegel’s view of the relation, but difference, between soul and spirit.

**Soul and Subjectivity**

In poem 1090, Emily Dickinson professes a fear of “owning” both a body and a soul:

I am afraid to own a Body –
I am afraid to own a Soul –
Profound – precarious Property –
Possession not optional –

Double Estate – entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir –
Duke in a moment of deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

Characteristically, this poem moves in two directions at several points, beginning in the
very first line with the word “own.” To own means, first, “to possess,” a sense affirmed in the fourth line where we learn that “Possession [is] not optional.” The second sense in which we might understand “own” is as “to admit,” or “to acknowledge,” in which case the speaker of the poem claims a fear of identifying herself with either body or soul, either personally or as these exist as concepts or universal abstracts imbued with a weight of historical and philosophical meaning. Although the poem goes on to engage the metaphorical language of inheritance, in which case body and soul are “estates” entailed upon an “unsuspecting Heir” (a situation I will take up in a moment), the second sense of “to own” has its own peculiar force which is also borne out in the language of the poem.

Why would the speaker fear acknowledging either body or soul? One clue emerges perhaps in the somewhat ironical personal claim that is the poem: “I am afraid to own a Body – / I am afraid to own a Soul-” (emphasis mine). The question of what comprises human identity is central here, as the “I” becomes problematic when portioned off from both body and soul.¹ Does the speaker fear that the sense of “I” is directly threatened by the subsuming forces of body and soul or in relation to the responsibility that comes with such ownership? It is easy to understand a concern about the limitations of body, but less characteristic in the face of things (though this thesis has argued for the opposite view) to reveal discomfort with being identified with the eternity of soul. In line 3 of the poem, however, the speaker refers to both body and soul as “Profound – precarious Property.” Here, it is possible to consider that a bidirectional understanding of “precarious” allows us to differentiate what body and soul mean for the poet. One meaning of “precarious” is revealed more in an etymological suggestiveness than in its

¹ As in Chapter 5.
precise meaning. To a playful mind, to be precarious could, literally, be to be in a state
tending toward decay and dissolution,\(^2\) a state in which the self is prelapsarian, but
tending toward fallenness, a sense encouraged by the word’s close proximity to
“Profound,” a word suggesting great depth, both literally and figuratively. Here the
speaker achieves a startling communication of a dual tendency, then: to have a body is to
be prone to decay and dissolution in a literal sense, because the body indeed breaks down
as it ages and dies, eventually ending up in the depths of the grave. The sense of depth
and falling carried by both “profound” and “precarious” is also reflected in the realm of
the soul, which is characteristically associated with depth and which, from a Christian
point of view, is capable of the fall which ultimately matters: the fall into sin and,
ultimately, Hell.

To which realm, then, the material or the spiritual, is it safer for a self to belong or
to identify with? For this speaker, well-versed in Christian theology, neither—and this,
since the soul’s state of health or decay is sorely dependent upon not the body’s natural
decay, but its choices and actions. All sin is essentially spiritual within the Christian
sensibility (because it involves choice and therefore presupposes free agency), but even
so, no sin is possible without a life in the body.\(^3\) Even a body unburdened by soul is still
doomed to the starkest of all resolutions—natural death.

The second sense of “precarious,” its literal meaning, also sheds significant light
on the speaker’s dilemma. Precarious also means: 1) “Question-begging, assumed, taken

\(^2\) This possibility is carried in one formal definition of “precarious”—“Exposed to danger, perilous, risky”
(Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933)).

\(^3\) One can see this in the traditional view of the 7 deadly sins that range from the most “corporeal” to the
most “psychic,” namely, gluttony at one end of the spectrum, involving ingestion of and transformation
into oneself of actual material, to avarice that involves possession of material things, to pride that involves
a self-reflexive process or moment of regarding oneself as more important than anyone or anything else.
for granted; unfounded, doubtful, uncertain”; 2) “Dependent upon circumstances or chance; liable to fail, insecure, unstable, uncertain” (*OED*). In what further sense can it be “precarious” to “own” a soul? As we will see, in both of these senses, but especially the first—“assumed, taken for granted; unfounded, doubtful, uncertain.” How can one safely or comfortably stake one’s identity upon something (in this case the soul) which cannot even be known to exist?

The third sense of precarious, etymologically derived (from the Latin word for prayer—*preces*), also problematises the issue. What is precarious is “obtained by begging, entreaty, or prayer,”⁴ a meaning which, if we include it, suggests a completely double attitude toward the very question of existence. Do we simultaneously beg for and fear to possess our own physical and spiritual lives, and if so, why?

To return momentarily to the notion of “possession,” we can clearly see that the speaker of the poem is really questioning, or at least making a question of (for the benefit of her own stability and security) where, precisely, the self resides. Or, more specifically, she questions the stability of the self’s habitation. “Possession” is “not optional”: the I must inhabit both body and soul; to “own” or claim both is to commit oneself to a double existence. That this is the condition of human existence is affirmed in many of the major philosophical and theological insights about the composition of the human person as a soul-body compound. For instance, Dickinson herself suggests this in poem 1576 (which I will take up later), when she metaphorically envisions the compound as a sea/tide complex, a noticeably Aristotelian image of form as it is implicit in matter.

Fundamentally, it is not unusual in a classical sense to consider that human identity emerges in the soul-body compound, not in any discrete part of it. The Platonist

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⁴ See *OED*, “precarious” definition 1).
and Christian heritage of this problem suggests that the body inhabits the more lasting soul, in which sense the soul comes to “possess” a body (or, as in poem 1576, which asks whether soul possesses, in fact, a series of bodies in succession, as one might dwell in several homes throughout a lifetime). In more popular terms, in a more secular, materialistically-oriented universe, we think of the soul inhabiting the body, the soul here being equated more with flight and mobility than with fixedness and stability. In any case, it is less unusual to fear the limitations of body than the expanses of soul. However, because the word “possession” also carries the sense of demonic possession, we can see how the speaker might understand the compound as capable of contamination by virtue of the portal of the soul. No doubt Dickinson plays here with the ancient Greek etymology of soul as *daimon* (i.e., Plato’s *Symposium*). For Dickinson, it is not unusual to recognize the degree to which the material aspects of the self contribute to or at least experience the most horrific instances of deterioration.

Regardless of the case, Dickinson here laments the fact that life (possessing both a body and a soul) is perhaps something not that we choose, but which is thrust upon us as a responsibility for which we are unprepared. We do not shop for our existence as we

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5 By this I mean that rather than soul being “in” body, body is rather “in” soul, and is, in this sense, owned by soul. So in the *Timaeus* Plato represents the demiurge as fashioning the body “in” soul rather than vice versa (34b).

6 This is represented in Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. See also *Timaeus* 90-91.

7 The soul’s adventure both in transformative consciousness (one that traverses the interval between the mundane interaction with matter/being and the awareness of death) and with and “unto itself” is identified as a kind of condemnation into being of soul in Dickinson’s poem 822 (see my extensive analysis in Chapter 5).

8 On another level, this poem perhaps registers something of what Daneen Wardrop (*Emily Dickinson’s Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996)) identifies as a dread of female characters in Gothic novels “often linked to doubts surrounding the legitimacy and authenticity of the family heritage, title, and estate” (21-2). Domhnall Mitchell (*Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*) comments further on this phenomenon, noting “the ambivalence that middle-class women might have
would for rooms to let, but must take what is willed to us. But from whom? The missing referent in stanza 2 further destabilizes the identity of the poem’s speaker. Who entails? Whose pleasure is it? From whom does this “double estate” of body and soul come? Dickinson doesn’t say, but clearly both the spiritual and material realms are suggested. The spiritual inheritance has already been suggested, but is tensioned by the existence of yet another directional juncture in the poem. The “double estate” is “entailed at pleasure.” The speaker suggests that the estate is passed down from heir to heir from an initial, undetermined source, and that it is entailed, that is, passed down in a predetermined succession, usually to a male heir. Is Dickinson suggesting that her inheritance, her spiritual and intellectual propensities and ways of seeing, typically belongs to the masculine domain, and therefore is dangerous or risky for her to possess, or more precarious and precious? We cannot say for certain, but we can recognize that the poet does not leave off troubling us with multiple meanings; we learn that the “double estate” is entailed “at pleasure”: either the compound is granted in a manner that truly satisfies or pleases the party who grants it, or, more precariously, it is derived from the moment of pleasure reflected in the passion of sexual intercourse. This second reading is most likely when one considers the meaning of “entail” which grants the effect of sexual penetration (Dickinson’s trusty lexicon may have taught her that a meaning of entail, although an obsolete one, is “to carve into the body”). The two different meanings of

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experienced toward property in the nineteenth century, since women were often without legal entitlement at a time when social prestige was defined in relation to ownership” (51).

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9 Joanne Fiet Diehl (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination) proposes that this is in some sense the case: “The body and soul Dickinson is afraid to own would be the masculine side of a self whose identity she assumes frequently in both her poems and letters” (25).

10 See OED, “entail.”
entail affect our understanding of precarious. If something is granted with pleasure, a benevolent benefactor stands above and behind, and the property is deemed precious; generated out of a brief moment of sexual pleasure during which two benefactors focus their attention solely on the present moment, the entailment becomes something unforeseen, perhaps even unexpected (and secondary to the sexual act), and thus dangerous, fraught with the risk of “Wild Nights,” also demonstrably prelapsarian. The inheritor becomes, understandably, “unsuspecting,” perhaps even in some sense the victim of a benefactor and an inheritance it never asked for. This kind of inheritance, as well as being composed of life itself, the duality of body and soul, is also original sin, foregrounded in the act of bodily pleasure. Thus the legacy of one’s self—whether in a spiritual, intellectual, or physical sense, is beyond the speaker’s control or desire.

Ultimately, the question of divine deliberation hangs in the balance. Does existence proceed from the hands of a loving God with a plan to fulfill our future needs, or does it proceed from a moment of chance during which, in the throes of ecstasy, people “play God” as it were, taking His territory for their own? Who, finally, is the “Duke in a moment of deathlessness?” Is it the “unsuspecting Heir,” a link in the chain of endless procession in the style of Adam and Eve post-fall, OR is it he or she who is

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11 See poem 249:

Wild Nights - Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the Winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor - Tonight –
In Thee!
engaged in the sexual act, the progenitors who ensure futurity and succession even in the moment of the “little death”? The second seems more likely, and fits more closely with the Promethean trajectory of interpretation suggested above.

Despite the various points at which the poem paradoxically doubles interpretive possibilities along spiritual and material trajectories, these lines never truly diverge in the way they initially seem to. If anything, the poem not only maintains the tension between the spiritual and the material, but also deepens the connection and illustrates the complexity and the paradox of human life. Dickinson provides here a fleeting glimpse of the imperfect and troubled human reception and transmission of what she sees as a divine project. There is little doubt that this is ultimately a poem about the question of inheritance—not only of body or soul, but of faith. What is ours, and what is not ours? If we do own or possess a body and soul, to what project are we committing ourselves? Our resources? What does it mean for our identity, and our conception of free will? The tone of the poem appears mostly to pose the fears of the victim of the inheritance, yet the

12 Shira Wolosky (“Emily Dickinson: being in the body,” The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2002) 132) takes this view, arguing that the “poem almost encapsulates Dickinson’s stance towards her religious inheritance in general, including its hierarchy of body and soul, or soul and body. That is, she is profoundly torn regarding her own inheriting of this tradition.” Further, she remarks, “Fear, or ambivalence, at owning a body with a soul resonates with centuries of metaphysical hierarchy, or suspicion, according to which embodiment in the material and temporal world somehow threatens, if it does not betray, essential nature defined as intelligible, or spiritual, or eternal” (134). In some senses this is a reasonable statement, but Wolosky does not, I think, realize the extent to which this was a question undertaken in the Christian heritage not so much with suspicion as with genuine striving for knowledge of the proper relationship between body and soul. Christianity affirmed the goodness of creation and, indeed, the body, from the outset, but this certainly never prevented a single Christian from probing this central mystery. If anything, Whitman-like forthrightness in joyfully claiming both is rather an anomaly in the history of the Christian tradition, and indeed, in many traditions. Emerson points this out: “The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence” (“The Over-Soul,” Collected Works Vol. I). Wolosky, in failing to acknowledge this, situates Dickinson’s concern with the unrelieved tension between body and soul within her status in a “female gender that complicates or contradicts assertions of American or Romantic selfhood; material progress in the world subverts or opposes, rather than realizes spiritual longings; self-fulfillment contests self-denial; and body remains in tension with soul.”
ending also allows for the possibility that the weight of inheritance is also a realm of absolute power and freedom, as God is conceived as a frontier waiting to be explored and settled. The end of the poem, then, is an opening-up out of the apparent enclosures and limitations in the rest of the poem. It is perhaps a realization of what the infinitude of both spiritual and material existence really means: not a static, encapsulated belief, but a divine territory to traverse as part of one’s birthright. The poem is, ultimately, curiously free of Puritan or New England theological weight in any specific sense. Yet, as always, it is imbued with the weight of the absurd impossible, the sublime sense of a task of discovery both exhilarating and overwhelming.

We are left, of course, with the question (among others) of what weight to give the apparent distinction between the “I” and the soul and body. Is the “I” something different from soul-body? Is it the “mind” or “spirit” conceived in some way as “above” the compound being? Or is it the self-reflexive subject that in some sense directs or reflects upon organic life, a subject that is nonetheless troubled by its weight? And is the subject as such that phenomenological self that “authors” the poem and is most aware of the divine frontier it in some sense is related to? There are no easy answers to these questions, though we may perhaps suppose that the “I” or subject (if it be so) is perhaps the broader subjective mind or spirit of the reflective poet.

Poem 1576 offers the reader further insight into Dickinson’s dialogue about what it means to have a body. As usual, she finds it difficult even to speak about the body.

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13 Joanne Fiet Diehl (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination) suggests that this is the “frontier of immortality that lies on the other side of the “property” she has inherited,” and thus is the frontier beyond death (25). I don’t think the meaning of the poem restricts exploration of God’s “frontier” to the “other side.” Rather, I argue that this is a poem in which the speaker is rightfully concerned about the great responsibility that comes with defining, accepting, and refining selfhood or subjectivity, and in which she probes the meaning of traditional conceptions of aspects of the human being both material and spiritual.
without also probing what appears to be the question of soul, though here—
tantalizingly—she excludes any reference to soul in favor of the word “spirit” (that later
in the poem appears implicitly to be equated with mind):

The Spirit lasts – but in what mode –

Below, the Body speaks,

But as the Spirit furnishes –

Apart, it never talks –

The Music in the Violin

Does not emerge alone

But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch

Alone – is not a Tune –

The Spirit lurks within the Flesh

Like Tides within the Sea

That make the Water live, estranged

What would the Either be?

Does that know – now – or does it cease –

That which to this is done,

Resuming at a mutual date

With every future one?

Instinct pursues the Adamant,

Exacting this Reply –

Adversity if it may be, or

Wild Prosperity,
The Rumor’s Gate was shut so tight
Before my Mind was sown,
Not even a Prognostic’s Push
Could make a Dent thereon –

Here, the major question Dickinson asks is what is the nature and activity of the spirit or soul in a historical sense (i.e., beyond its role as animator of the body). She grants, first, that the soul or “spirit” is “lasting,” suggesting by inference that the body is not, but seems to presume that this spirit’s continuity is not always stable or recognizable as its function changes. Her use of the word “mode” to describe a current state of the spirit reveals Dickinson’s view of soul-spirit as hypostatic\(^\text{14}\), as carrying more than one face. However, unlike the body, which also has a face, albeit a stable one (prone to disintegration, yes, but not to absolute, unpredictable transformation), the face of the spirit is “silent”; it does not “speak” except as it informs the body with the power of speech. Soul-spirit here is variously represented metaphorically as: 1) the furniture of the body, in which sense the body becomes a house or habitation; 2) an added x-factor to touch and instrument to make music in the violin\(^\text{15}\); and 3) the tides “within the sea.” There is a troubling sense also that the speaker considers the spirit not simply to inhabit the body, the water, but to haunt the flesh, “lurking” within it in a manner not usually associated with tidal forces in relation to the sea. Of course, tides are not really a thing at all; they are the water currents themselves, the sea drawn by planetary and lunar gravitation. The tide as something within the sea, then, is nothing material at all; it is,

\(^{14}\) I mean by “hypostatic,” *hypostasis* as face or mode of a substance as in the Nicene formula for the Trinity: “one *ousia* (substance), three persons or faces (*prosopa-hypostaseis*).

\(^{15}\) As we saw above in relation to Plato’s *Phaedo* 85e and following in Chapter 2.
however, the result of a force, a motion or movement of the water. In this sense, it is an appropriate metaphor for the spirit (see gloss of poem 1695) conceived in the Aristotelian sense of soul as form or animator, that is, as an activity of an organic body potentially having life. Yet the addition of “lurking” makes it seem also a frightening, alien thing.

The haunting quality of the spirit might at least be partially attributed to its very immateriality, its “silence,” and its evasiveness, qualities which, ironically, are often attributed to the mythical/mystical poet herself. In other poems she refers to the “polar privacy” (see gloss of poem 1695 later in the chapter) of the self in relation to soul, or to a “loneliness one dare not sound” that marks the depths of the self. The speaker nonetheless makes it clear that the body and spirit would both be unrecognizable without the other, that they embrace in mutual dependence. Yet the ability of one aspect of a

16 See Aristotle, *De Anima* II,1. Aristotle’s famous definition of the relationship of soul to body is, of course, difficult to interpret. What I think Aristotle might reasonably be taken to mean is that Aristotle did not so much see soul and body as 2 separate things, but rather as 2 dynamic forces in relation to each other as form to matter or as activity in realization of a potency. Emerson to some degree also regards soul in this manner, as evident in “The Over-Soul”: “All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light” (*Collected Works*, Vol. II, 161).

17 See poem 777:

The Loneliness One dare not sound—
And would as soon surmise
As in its Grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size—

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see—
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny—

The Horror not to be surveyed—
But skirted in the Dark—
With Consciousness suspended—
And Being under Lock—

I fear me this - is Loneliness—
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate - or seal -
“self” to haunt another is striking and suggests a certain tension or distance between spirit and body.

The second portion of the poem (beginning with line 13), with its ambiguous pronoun references, casts the reader into the abyss of an even more central question than that of the nature of the spirit or soul. Here, she focuses more directly on the activity of the spirit: that is, if we can assume that “that” and “it” in line 1 refer to the spirit. If we grant that the spirit is identified with activity—i.e., with “furnishing” or activating the potential of body, we can perhaps assume that the speaker questions whether the soul, in seeking some kind of knowledge, has established a pattern, ceaselessly, of doing something to this particular body, and then proceeding to do the same to many future bodies. (After establishing a hierarchical scheme of body-spirit relations reminiscent of a Neoplatonic structure of emanation and suspension in stanza 1, the speaker undoes this image somewhat by suggesting that the spirit seeks bodies in an attempt to gain knowledge of matter. One familiar with Neoplatonism recognizes that within this tradition, especially in Plotinus (via Emerson), it is understood that the soul, as an emanation of divine mind, not only transmigrates or inhabits a succession of different bodies but also abhors its connection to matter, for which reason successive emanations, such as that of individual mind, are necessary to “reach down” toward body and matter, acting as its redemptive potential—or, in Dickinsonian terms, “furnish[ing] apart.”)\textsuperscript{18} The poem is about the activity of soul, but also about the growth of soul, perhaps even of the soul’s abuse of body. The poem’s tone suggests an inherent critique of the instrumental view that the spiritual takes of the material, similar to the argument implicit in the

\textsuperscript{18} See Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 72ff.
previous poem criticizing the attitude of one who consciously or otherwise “wills” a material and spiritual estate to the “unsuspecting Heir.”

The speaker then goes on to ask whether, at any point, the soul-spirit becomes satisfied with what it knows as a result of inhabiting the speaking body, and “ceases” its spiritual haunting. The speaker then moves into a present tense voice, taking on the role of Spirit (Instinct)—her spirit itself attempts to gain the answer, pursuing Adamant (meaning certainty, but also pure indestructible materiality and necessity), but finds that her mind was “planted” or “sown”\(^{19}\) (even “sewn up”) in such a way that there has been a closing-off of the avenue to such knowledge. Here, the mind is stuck on the side of spirit, and cannot penetrate matter. This is, perhaps, the real problem of a largely Platonist view: the distancing of matter, even in an intellectual sense, can prevent a real understanding of it, while in lived experience, even the most spiritual of selves instinctively desires to know matter.

One last point here: the tone of the poem seems to accuse spirit of a ceaseless, merciless activity in relation to the body. A central image of the second stanza is of a spirit haunting bodies, inhabiting one after another for its own purposes, its own enlightenment, and then discarding them.\(^{20}\) The body becomes instrumental in the worst sense, because to use and discard a body is really to create and enable death. One can

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\(^{19}\) This image would seem to resonate with Plato’s *Timaeus* (41d and following) where the souls of those to be born are “sown” in the stars by the Demiurge or Divine Craftsman.

\(^{20}\) James McIntosh (*Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000)) suggests rather that in these lines the “speaker seems to ask whether the spirit knows or ceases to know the fate of the body after death and also whether they ‘resume’ their unity at the last judgment, when the body is restored to the soul.” He argues that the relative obscurity of these lines was necessary perhaps “to convey the trouble of her questions” (79). I think that the notion of “possession” or haunting attributed to spirit and perhaps of some kind of metempsychosis is more likely evident here, as the speaker qualifies that soul might possibly do to “every future one” (emphasis mine) what it does to the “body” of this poem.
imagine a New England attitude of spiritual helplessness in the face of constant and very visible death.

Here then we find a highly ambivalent view of the apparent Spirit/mind-body problem posed in the stark existential experience of the phenomenological “self” that speaks the poem. The reflecting self seems to comprehend the spirit/mind-body structure and yet it may only falsely believe that it is not fully coterminous with, or even subordinate to some part of that compound existence. Any attempt to wrestle some hierarchical or organic structure out of this phenomenological dialectic of subjectivity seems arbitrary.

In poem 384, Dickinson presents the body-soul once again as a compound of sorts, working to ensure the survival of the self or the “me”:

No Rack can torture me –
My Soul – at Liberty –
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One –

You cannot prick with saw –
Nor pierce with Scimitar –
Two bodies – therefore be –
Bind One – The Other – fly –

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest –
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou –

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy –
Captivity is Consciousness –
So’s Liberty.

Here, Dickinson takes the Plotinian view (*Ennead* III.6)\(^{21}\) that the soul is impassible (i.e., that it cannot suffer the pain of the body), or the Socratic view that in its true nature the soul as the most real form of “me,” “I” cannot be harmed and, insofar as soul constitutes “me,” to experience bodily suffering at the hands of an external source does not constitute an experience of torture for the self.\(^{22}\) Here the “me” seems most clearly identified with the soul and not the body. While the body can be pinned on the rack, the soul remains “at liberty” “Behind this mortal Bone.” The soul here is also named the bolder of the two parts of the compound, suggesting something of a rock-like adamantine substance that has a durability (bolder—boulder) and would be untouched by either saw or scimitar, instruments that could harm the body. This durable soul is also identified, in Dickinson’s typical double-imaging, as a “bolder One,” meaning either or (perhaps) all of the following: 1) that soul is another body (the antecedent for “One”); 2) that it is Unity itself, indivisible and uncuttable in a way the body proper simply is not; or 3) that it can be identified with the Platonic-Neoplatonic One, either the “One” of the soul


\(^{22}\) See Plato’s *Apology* 28dff., *Phaedo* 114d-115e.
or of intellect or ultimately the One as source of all unity, goodness, beauty, and truth.

The view suggested in 1) is affirmed in line 7: “Two Bodies – therefore be -.” Although in a modern or postmodern sense it appears strange indeed to consider soul another body, in the Christian Hermetic tradition with which, for example, Emerson was familiar (and with which Dickinson would have been familiar not least through the works of Thomas Brown and, possibly, Taylor)\(^\text{23}\), three “bodies” are in fact acknowledged, only one of them physical. The soul “body” is known as the “astral” body, although it is unclear to what extent the hermetic-occultist astral body corresponds to the astral body of modern pagan occultism.\(^\text{24}\) It is likely that the two are indeed very different. Perhaps a simpler explanation might be the ancient Stoic materialist view that the soul is corporeal and exists in different tensions throughout the universe, but that it is ultimately a manifestation of the Spirit or divine \textit{Pneuma} which pervades the Universe. In the context, this is a possible interpretation, but not likely since Dickinson rejects it.

This pithy poem goes even further to tell us more about Dickinson’s conception of or at least her carefully composed and qualified premises about, the nature of the soul. The soul’s body (that is, the astral body), like the body itself (although only by virtue of the soul) has an “existence”: \textit{it exists}! “Two Bodies – therefore \textit{be}.” Dickinson could have formulated this differently, in the more regular “there \textit{are} two bodies.” Instead, she chooses an ironic subjunctive or even imperative form which also carries metaphysical, existential weight. Is it going too far to say that the poet suggests that the soul itself has a life completely independent, but conceivable as a life much like that of the body?


\(^{24}\) For the astral body see Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 108-109.
Dickinson has indicated in several poems that the soul “lives,” in the sense that it has an existence, a trajectory, and is capable of growth, even while she considers that it is nonetheless eternal. This view of soul was proposed above in my reading of poem 1576, in which the speaker questioned at which point the soul is satisfied with what it knows of matter, a question that assumes outright that the soul is capable of growth, and that, moreover, attributes to soul a desire not normally associated with it.

The third stanza of the poem borrows the flight metaphor (attributed both to the soul and to the astral body) to draw a comparison between the eagle’s possessiveness in inhabiting its nest and the soul’s inhabitation of the body. The implication is that eagles can only be separated from their nests with great difficulty, and that you (“thou”) can achieve a separation of body from soul with only even greater difficulty while the historical self lives (this poem is not, I think, about the fate of the soul in death). (A major question that emerges is really about the separation of powers of the self in times of trial, a question that was taken up earlier in the section on Pain and Perception in Chapter 2.) The final two lines trouble the reader with a new perspective of the self and the conditions of a supposed separation of soul and body. The soul loses its close, possessive grasp on body in life under a certain condition of internal strife—self-enmity (this is not to say that the soul abandons body altogether—the eagle still owns the nest even when he flees momentarily from it. The problem is one of space, or spatial proximity). Consciousness is a faculty, force, or activity which occupies a mediating position between the two “bodies” of the poem. Whether the soul is held captive alongside the suffering body or whether it is liberated to act as a stable, secure source of equity for selfhood is dependent upon consciousness. To return briefly to the initial
claim of this poem, in which we are told that Soul is “at Liberty,” we must now, in light of the final four lines, perhaps modify this claim. If “liberty,” like “captivity,” is consciousness, and if soul is “at liberty” only in consciousness, then soul is clearly bound in some sense by consciousness. Such an idea is evident in poem 894, which implies that consciousness is a potential burden to soul, an accretion that can soil it. What does Dickinson mean by consciousness? This can only be determined by an analysis of its valences in many poems, but we can say from this poem that consciousness is somehow a “term between” which is identified entirely with neither body nor soul. The part of the self, nonetheless, that makes it capable of being its own enemy is Consciousness—we might thus at least perceive consciousness to be a malleable, changeable force. It might seem that the most obvious rendering of the final stanza is indeed the simplest or the most likely: should we conclude that Dickinson simply means that what one suffers is really

25 Kenneth Stocks (Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness), in noting that in this poem “‘Captivity’ and ‘Liberty’ are both in the consciousness,” sees Dickinson here as confronting “the human predicament as it presented itself to the underlying consciousness of the age, in response to which existentialism as a working philosophy emerged” (i.e., through its forefathers Kant and Kierkegaard). He thus regards it as a “response to a crisis of the human spirit in a new situation” (53). He therefore implicitly suggests that the claims of the opening stanza and its subsequent development are overtaken and subsumed (and thus rendered meaningless in so far as they are highly qualified) by the orientation of consciousness.

26 Poem 894:
Of Consciousness, her awful Mate
The Soul cannot be rid –
As easy the secreting her
Behind the Eyes of God.

The deepest hid is sighted first
And scant to Him the Crowd –
What triple Lenses burn upon
The Escapade from God –

27 See poem 721, lines 1-3:
Behind Me – dips Eternity –
Before Me – Immortality –
Myself – the Term between –

See also poem 822, “This Consciousness that is aware,” in which consciousness (and, thus, “experience”) “alone/ [traverses] the interval.” It thus, in a sense, becomes along with experience the interval in so far as it is the content with which the interval is momentarily filled.
dependent upon one’s state of mind, in the manner of “sticks and stones”? Perhaps—but one cannot really take this simply without ignoring the complex images created in the first 3 stanzas.

One final note here: it is both possible and tempting to consider this poem a proclamation of sorts about the poet’s own self-protective capacity, perhaps alongside the reading suggested above. There are two senses in which this might be considered. First, the poet’s “body” and her soul—her body of work, her poems themselves scrutinized, judged, dissected, even tortured by the critic? Her soul—her essential self, the unknowable “Me” or “I” that stands behind, above, beyond and yet throughout the work popularly believed to represent the self? Second, could the two “bodies,” the “body” and the “soul,” be the poem as a ding an sich that slips away from the body pinned down, the determinate meaning of the poem as established by the reader? “Bind One – The Other Fly”—is perhaps a warning against interpretation. In the “binding” of any single interpretation, more meaningful possibilities are perhaps lost? Is the possession of any particular interpretation a loss of the expansive whole? Why not? This is a position established very forcefully in other poems such as “Publication is the Auction of the Mind of Man” and “Perception of an Object costs - .”28 In reading Dickinson, one would be prudent to heed such a warning (a position that critics such as Sharon Cameron take in Choosing Not Choosing, although this position is maintained primarily in light of textual variants identified in Dickinson’s fascicles.29 I would maintain that we need not rely on textual variants to make the argument that Dickinson prefers not choosing—even a critic

28 For “perception” poem, see my reading in Chapter 2, Pages 32-6. See also poem 709, first stanza: “Publication – is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man ./ Poverty – be justifying/ For so foul a thing”

or editor’s choice of any particular variant leaves one in the uncomfortable position of sitting at a baffling crossroads). As I have shown, even when one confines oneself to (or binds) a particular interpretive context (in my case philosophical/theological), which is already a strict limiting of a vast field of potential valences, one is still faced with the very difficult problem of attempting to discern non-contradictory, singular interpretations. Within the context of the interpretive framework I have applied, I have chosen to highlight rather than reduce parallel lines of interpretation, with the point of being honest but also with the goal of demonstrating how wide is the space which Dickinson opens up for herself, and how she resists being placed on the rack. This does not mean that parallel lines of interpretation do not, however, yield a coherent field of possibilities.

As a final consideration in this part of the chapter, let us look briefly at poem 957, which further proposes a particular analytical activity of soul as a response to suffering and its aftermath:

As One does Sickness over
In convalescent Mind
His scrutiny of Chances
By blessed health obscured –

As One rewalks a Precipice
And whittles at the Twig
That held Him from Perdition
Sown sideways in the Crag

30 Arguably, this is another of Dickinson’s “slants”; the “Twig/That [holds one] from Perdition” is an irruption across an interval between two poles upon a “Precipice.” It occurs between the poles of
A Custom of the Soul

Far after suffering

Identity to question

For evidence 't has been

This is a problematic poem for its view of the soul as an entity or activity that historically experiences pain or suffering, especially in light of the confident rendering in poem 384 (1862) of the speaker’s assertion that the soul is impassible and that this impassibility both preserves and constitutes the identity of the speaker. Here, in poem 957, written approximately two years later, two central ideas occur, both of which destabilize the claims of 384. First, the speaker notes that both mind and soul have an analogous relationship to, respectively, “sickness” and “suffering.” Just as the mind apparently engages in the dangerous activity of “[scrutinizing]” the conditions of existence through which the body (and Mind) in sickness has passed, so does the Soul, by “custom,” probe a past of suffering to “question” its identity, searching for evidence of its very existence (“For evidence it has been –”). It may even be possible to conclude that in the experience of suffering, the soul identifies so strongly with that experience that in that time frame, suffering is the identity, per se, of the soul (this is a view which is supported in the poem “There is a pain – so utter// It swallows substance up -“)\(^{32}\) This insight demonstrates that

\(^{31}\) See Chapter 2.

\(^{32}\) See Chapter 2, pp. 61-5.
pain can constitute the vanishing point of being in non-being, as the grammar of the final stanza allows.

This reading also makes sense in the light of stanzas one and two, in which the speaker suggests that in revisiting illness, the mind in fact places itself in absolute peril, perhaps even of a spiritual kind (perdition), unwittingly carving away at the slender twig that preserved her in the first place. This suggests that in fact intellectual immersion in the experience of illness, even recollectively, threatens to cast one into the abyss. The spiritual language of “blessing” is related to two things: the absence of sickness (health) and the obscuration from the mind of sickness. It is, it seems, spiritually provident to efface or forget such sickness. Why, then, this “custom of the Soul” to engage in such a dangerous activity? Here, it is the question of identity at the deepest level that is being probed. Does the soul naturally have or desire a different kind of identity from that of Mind? If we think back to other poems, this seems likely. Mind is connected in this poem to the experience of body (“sickness”) as distinct from “suffering,” a more general malaise attributed here to soul or at least overseen by it. The doctrine of the eternity of the soul, or its immortality, is probed by Dickinson in many poems. If the soul becomes suffering when it experiences suffering, it loses its recognizable continuity once that suffering is effaced by “blessed” health. To obscure any experience, even one of pain, is to lose a link in the chain of history. The soul will have its identity in suffering or in health, but no one can perceive these reasonably as belonging to the same entity, so disruptive is true suffering. Yet ultimately, to seek the soul’s continuity in a blank period of suffering is to cast oneself into the abyss, and to risk the very loss of the soul. This is a startling premise: that one’s soul can be lost not in discernible, obvious sin, but simply in

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33 See also my discussion of the “swoon” of soul in Chapter 2, p. 63.
contemplation of its own moments of *apparent* non-being. There is, nonetheless, a precedent for this in the Christian tradition—in the 8 *logismoi* or reasonings of Evagrius of Pontus, the forerunner to the seven deadly sins tradition, to dwell in sadness is to sin.\(^3\) To conclude briefly, then, this poem establishes further another capacity of soul, the reflective capacity, even in its potential folly (loss of soul in contemplation of the darkness from which it emerged).

To sum up so far: for Emily Dickinson, identity, that is, sameness or continuity over time and the equation of self with one or more apparent components of one’s being, is both profound and precarious, which is to say that she does not reject identity as a problem or question profoundly worth pursuing, while she recognizes the tenuousness of tying one’s apparent being to any single stable entity, since all can be overturned or questioned further. Neither mind nor spirit, neither soul nor body, seem to account for the fluid depth of reflective subjectivity; and even the I or me, no matter how much “they” may seem to organize all other elements in the purview of human consciousness, are not above the fray of experience, like some transcendental guarantee of identity. The divine and the infinite are undoubtedly there throughout, but for human consciousness the divine seems to be a frontier of new existence (as we saw in Chapter 5), intimated but never made into a thing in the Infinite Finite of human experience. At the same time, we are compelled to admit that, as we have seen throughout earlier chapters, even when Dickinson is caught in these problematic stages of self-articulation, there is nonetheless an underlying confidence that the “All” exists, that she knows what she is missing and that the transcendent transfixeds even ordinary experience with its flight or light. This is

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not therefore an existential dilemma in a post-modern sense where one simply concludes that the divine or the transcendent is endless deferral or worse, that we may have this desire but the desire has no object and, therefore, we are compelled to construct a new means of satisfying the post-modern condition and construct meaning for ourselves. Rather, as the next three sections will demonstrate, Dickinson regards the subject as deliberately curtailing its own modes of attention and existence for the sake of adjusting or attuning itself to a transcendent “object” that she shows as revealing itself within the dialectic we have analyzed in earlier chapters. Dickinson regards self-limitation as another activity of soul that suggests soul’s agency beyond a degree which we have so far discerned. Beyond this self-limitation exists an even more self-formative agency that perhaps encompasses all of the faculties of the subject, including perception, consciousness, mind, and soul in statements of renunciation. To this we will now turn, taking up self-limitation as a faculty of soul first.

**The Soul as Self-Limitation**

Dickinson’s poem “The Soul selects her own Society”—explores one of Dickinson’s most important themes, one which is certainly represented in poems discussed in other chapters, but which deserves some independent consideration: the theme of self-limitation as a means of articulating subjectivity, and of anticipating a theme of even larger importance, self-renunciation. Although renunciation or

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35 This poem is sometimes rather simplistically read in a biographical context, but without actually analyzing the poem. See, for example, Donna Dickenson (Emily Dickinson): “But it was with her brother (William) Austin (1829-95) that Emily served her apprenticeship in shutting out the world. This isolation . . . was to produce poems like this…” (14). To “read” this poem in such a perfunctory manner is to be unjust to its nuanced use of language and, indeed, all of its interpretive problems.
limitation is often conceived simply as negation, it is important that we consider the extent to which Dickinson frames this important concept as directed by the will with the purpose of defining the space that one inhabits, affirming and naming the telos of the human being, and thus as simultaneously positive assertion and yet negation. Simply stated, this poem presents the Soul as actively seeking “[its] own Society,” opening itself to “Society” in the moment of selection, then having admitted those she prefers, limiting not only her audience, but her own attention:

The Soul selects her own Society -
Then - shuts the Door - 36
To her divine Majority -
Present no more -

Unmoved - she notes the Chariots - pausing -
At her low Gate -
Unmoved - an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat -

I've known her - from an ample nation -
Choose One -
Then - close the Valves of her attention -
Like Stone -

36 See Emerson’s “The OverSoul”: “But if [man] would know what the great God speaketh, he must ‘go into his closet and shut the door,’ as Jesus said. God will not make himself manifest to cowards. He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men’s devotion . . .The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it. . .” (Collected Works Vol. II, 174-5).
The second two lines of the first stanza fracture the poem’s stability, depending upon whether we read “Present” as an active or as a passive verb. In the first case, we must read lines 3-4 as an imperative: once the soul has chosen, none can “present” themselves for selection “to her divine majority.” In this case, the “divine majority” is internal to the soul (in light of stanza 3 the divine majority becomes Soul and the One); it is what constitutes the “Society,” and the Soul becomes the figure which transcends the mere paltry “Emperors” who must in vain stoop to her “low gate” or supplicate themselves before her.

In the second case, we can read “Present” as a passive representation of the soul in the aftermath of having chosen her society; the soul is no longer “present” to “her divine Majority.” Here, the divine majority becomes something excluded, not included, in the process of selection. This makes the Soul also a queen or goddess among divine entities—or, if we consider the model of self she borrows in other poems (the Neoplatonic model in which Soul is suspended and yet receptive to the Intellect and the One) as the one which governs this poem, we have a situation in which the soul performs a task of absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency as it blocks the process of emanation and return that characterizes the creativity of the One. This act of independence breaks the hegemonic rule of an abstract principle over a feminine, receptive one. This reading is supported by the vertical dimension the poet establishes in lines one and two of the second stanza (Plato’s chariot descends to the Soul’s “low gate”?). This self-assertion also breaks the Soul free from the demands of a kind of eternal return, like an endless afternoon cycle of visitors to which the host must be constantly receptive. Only in the act of selection—an act also of limitation—does the

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Soul find rest, literally, as she becomes twice “unmoved” in stanza 2. Finally, in stanza 3, the reader is faced with the speaker’s claim that the Soul has been known to “Choose One
- / Then - close the Valves of her attention -/ Like Stone -.” One of the most interesting things about this poem is the mechanical image with which the poem ends—the image of the valve is a brutal one, and difficult for the reader to interrogate. Certainly it carries effectively the notion of absolute domination or control, but it is a departure in this poem from the allegory of the royal court. However, if we take “attention” to be analogous to consciousness, this becomes a poem in which the Soul controls its receptivity through the portal of consciousness\textsuperscript{38}, making consciousness its instrument (a fine counter-balance to the readings of the poems in Section 1 of this chapter).

This poem suggests that the Soul has the capacity to choose what it attends to even if, ultimately, it does indeed choose “One,” or “the One” of Neoplatonism, the highest principle available to it. If this is about receptivity to the One, Soul is characterized here as not exhausting itself in receiving it (in the same way that the One does not exhaust itself in the process of emanation). Ultimately, this poem can be read as a characterization of the Soul as enacting absolute devotion, absolute attention, to that singular principle which exceeds the busyness and multiplicity of all others.

This principle of self-limitation as an activity of the Soul as it comes to know itself is represented with startling clarity in poem 769, a rather cryptic reflection on what it is that the soul or self achieves in choosing “One”:

\begin{quote}
One and One – are One –

Two – be finished using –

Well enough for Schools –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Contrast with Emerson’s assertion that no “valves” or walls intercede.
But for Minor Choosing –

Life – just – or Death –

Or the Everlasting –

More – would be too vast

For the Soul’s Comprising –

Surprisingly, the speaker seems to suggest the soul’s contraction, not its expansion, as it chooses oneness over multiplicity or duality because “More – would be too vast/ For [its] Comprising.” Yet the poem’s language is paradoxical. It seems in stanza one to imply the entire epistrophic nature of the descended Soul in its emanation and return to the One, and in the One’s intimate presence providing even the possibility of such emanation and reversion or return. In this sense, the solitariness of the soul (the “minor” “One”) “chooses” the “One” (italics mine), achieving the full conversion of the soul as it becomes unified with the One by looking back to its source; in doing so, it also becomes one in nature with the One from which it was previously separated.  

The soul here chooses union and thus oneness of nature over duality, duality being the “Two,” the addition of the “One and One” that it must negotiate in its earlier “school[ing].” It eventually “finishe[s]” with this concept, returning from its exploration to see and know union. The soul, although the “minor” aspect of the One, “chooses” this recognition, yet we cannot know whether this is an escape in any sense from a dialectical oscillation

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39 Evagrius of Pontus, the 4th-century interpreter and expositor of the classical virtue tradition in the light of Christianity and an ascetical and contemplative teacher, in speaking of the eventual union of fallen minds with God, remarks: “When minds flow back into him like torrents into the sea, he changes them all completely into his own nature, color, and taste . . . And as in the fusion of rivers with the sea no addition to its nature or variation in its color or taste is to be found, so also in the fusion of minds with the Father no duality of natures or quaternity of persons comes about” (from Letter to Melania 6 (quoted in McGinn, Bernard, ed., The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 428).
between two poles. Nonetheless, in maintaining that the Soul is “One and One” and not “Two,” the speaker seems to suggest in stanza two that it escapes at least one dialectic in which the attention or capacity of the soul is divided between consideration of seemingly disparate, conflicted vistas, such as “life” or “Death” or the “Everlasting.”\textsuperscript{40} The soul, which even as it achieves union with the One never fully becomes the One, has its first full experience with any aspect of reality only in so far as it makes this choice.

Dickinson takes up a similar theme later (in poem 1695) as she identifies the nature of the soul as it seeks, recognizes, or chooses or “admit[s]” itself or its \textit{telos} as indeed not an escape from dialectic but as an entry into a profound kind of privacy or solitude which nonetheless comprehends or includes both finiteness and infinity:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite Infinity.

Here, she revisits the paradoxical premise that soul or self as it is doubled in a moment of self-recognition is, ironically, more profoundly alone than it would be otherwise. The solitude created as the soul “admits” itself to itself (either true self-doubling, self-haunting, or simply self-recognition, as in a mirror) makes material, natural solitudes

\textsuperscript{40} This is largely Emerson’s view: “The soul knows only the soul; the web of events is the flowing robe in which she is clothed” (“The Over-Soul” in \textit{Collected Works}, Vol. II, 163).
(such as space, death, and the ocean) appear wholly social by comparison. This is a privacy that is “polar”—invoking both the isolation of the North and South Poles, but also the loneliness of the soul traversing two poles of its own nature. In admitting itself to itself, the soul gathers to itself two other poles, perhaps aspects of its own divided nature—the finite and the infinite. Once again, this seems imposingly abstract and difficult to grasp without the aid of mystical theology and Neoplatonism. It is only the soul that can hold these two poles together in a unity, and only a soul that can admit the higher soul of which it partakes—the infinite soul, the All. This polar privacy is reminiscent of the soul “attended by a Single Hound - / Its own identity” in poem 822. What pain does to the perceiving self in consciousness at later levels of the dialectic—which is to both infinitely contract and expand the perception of time, is a mere prefiguration of this higher level of development of the subject, namely, there is simultaneous contraction and expansion out of temporality into eternity. One is no longer simply trapped in time that seems infinite, yet nothing; one is instead, simultaneously traversing, or participating in, both its material and spiritual aspect, namely, time and eternity.

**Renunciation as the Soul’s Self-Limitation**

In addition to identifying soul as having an impulse to seek oneness over multiplicity, and as actively seeking to know its own telos or nature, Dickinson also thematically identifies the processes the subject might engage so as to achieve this end.

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41 Here I have not emphasized the resonance with Hegel, but certainly the immediate relation of the Infinite Finite in Hegel’s dialectic is a parallel, though the intimacy and particular focus I wish to adumbrate here is, in my view, significantly different.
Renunciation is conceived by her as a process that becomes necessary to the subject who is aware fundamentally of the extent to which material reality is a deferral, a mere shadow of, and yet a signal of the imageless, eternal world (in the Chapter on Absence I proposed that she also conceives the perceived absences lying at the root of material existence to serve this function). To renounce even what can be grasped in a material sense is shown by the poet to be only right and proper in so far as one who does so seeks that which is most true and real, and which is its own telos. Intrinsically negative as far as it says “no” and casts off what is incomplete, it is also a positive movement, a solution or conclusion to the problematics of perception in a poem such as “Perception of an Object costs” (see Chapter 2), as the speaker comprehends more clearly in which way the cost-benefit analysis of perception tends. Poem 745 illuminates many of the qualities of absence discussed earlier, but especially 1) the redemptive quality of a rightly-directed desire (Dickinson is clearly no Buddhist) and 2) traditional Christian assumptions about the proper end of human existence. Dickinson goes so far in the poem as to suggest that renunciation is in fact a “virtue,” albeit a “piercing” one:

Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue –

The letting go

A presence – for an Expectation –

Not now –

The putting out of Eyes –

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Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time) presents an excellent reading of this poem, even as she reads into it “the tone of someone trying to convince herself of something that she finds both difficult and imperative to believe—that renunciation is a virtue” (40). The aspect of Cameron’s reading that I find most interesting and in tune with my own is in her acknowledgement of two aspects of the self that are bound in this poem, the self that is to be cast off (in which renunciation becomes “an act that violates the self”) and the self that is secured (in which renunciation is “an act that legitimates the self”). She posits a third self, an “arbiter,” perhaps the speaker of the poem. I like this reading, and feel that what I refer to below as the “dialectic of renunciation” implicit in the final 6 lines of the poem comprehends these ideations.
Just Sunrise –
Lest Day –
Day’s Great Progenitor –
Outvie
Renunciation – is the Choosing
Against itself –
Itself to justify
Unto itself –
When larger function –
Make that appear –
Smaller – that Covered Vision – Here.\(^{43}\)

So what precisely are the objects of renunciation in this poem? They are, in order of mention, “presence,” the “now,” and “sight” (“the putting out of Eyes –”). We are apprised that this renunciation is enacted as a cautionary measure, to prevent an error, and perhaps to disarm a temptation—in which case, it is appropriate to regard it as having all of the self-correcting qualities of a virtue. The temptation to be so avoided by renunciation is this: to be seduced or overpowered by what is secondary, not primary, in human existence, so that one does not, for instance, mistake the full light of day (or

\(^{43}\) See also Emerson in “The Transcendentalist” regarding the nature of the Idealist: “His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him . . .” (\textit{Collected Works Vol. I}, p. 203). I think the primary distinction between Dickinson and Emerson is evident with reference to this passage. Emerson is explicitly confident in the stability of the self, for which reason he can posit so effectively the self’s reliance on itself. Dickinson, by contrast, finds self-certainty troubled at so many levels that she tends to focus more of her confidence on a notion of soul only in relation to what Emerson would call the OverSoul (and what I have identified as the Neoplatonic principle of the One). What both share here, nonetheless, is the premise that what is central, or sharing in the nature of the absolute, reorganizes and relativizes everything within the purview of the self.
nature) for the full light of intelligibility (i.e., “Day” for “Day’s Great Progenitor”).

Further, this self-correcting aspect of renunciation is evident in the reference to the term “justify.” To renounce a thing or a state of being is to clarify precisely what that thing is and to understand it in its proper proportions; it thus “makes right” the thing itself, preventing harm caused by the weakness of perception. Doing so allows one to note the “smallness” not only of self or ego in relation to the divine, but also of materiality itself. The “larger function” asserts itself or becomes visible when perception is righted by renunciation. What is “smaller” now correctly “appear[s]” so, recognized now by the subject as having been a form of blindness or a “Covered Vision” (or, alternately, what was first seen and is now recognized as smaller had before “covered vision,” disrupting clear perception). It is the “Here” of the last line of the poem that is, further, the offending illusion in so far as it is taken for the whole of existence. Although the poet does not specifically engage the language of the divine or transcendent in the poem, her insight corresponds precisely to that of Gregory the Great (6th Century) who fused Platonic and Stoic thinking in his reflections (called Dialogues) on the approach to God:

To the soul that sees the Creator every creature is limited. To anyone who sees even a little of the light of the Creator everything will become small, because in the very light of the inner vision the mind’s core is opened up. It is so expanded that it stands above the world. The soul of someone who sees in this way is even above itself. When the soul is raptured above itself in God’s light, it is enlarged in its interior parts, and while it gazes upon what is beneath it, in its elevated state it comprehends
how small something is that it could not grasp what it was
when it was in its lowly state.\textsuperscript{44}

Renunciation being, then, a process by which cognitive perception or judgment, an estimation of the relative value or size of things (especially the natural or human in light of the divine) is purified, is also thus a “putting out of Eyes,” the sacrificing of material vision altogether.\textsuperscript{45} To put out one’s eyes is to sacrifice that which one normally stakes one’s identity upon—the certainty of one’s own perceptions. Thus, renunciation as marked in this poem is also self-renunciation—the putting out of the “I” as well as the “eye.” One does so to justify or adjust oneself to the transcendent and absolute truth, in regard to which the self is correctly perceived as nothing.\textsuperscript{46} The self is thus also properly reconstituted in the dialectic of renunciation; we are told that “Renunciation - is the Choosing/ Against itself -/ Itself to justify/ Unto itself.” This gymnastic proposition demonstrates the process through which the self necessarily oscillates between two poles of its own identity—between the “itself” from which it deliberately recedes toward the “not itself” which it furnishes with “itself,” thus properly constituting what it “is” as

\textsuperscript{44} Quoted in Bernard McGinn, ed., \textit{The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism} (NY: The Modern Library, 2006).

\textsuperscript{45} Images of blindness and self-blinding from Greek tragedy and philosophy are relevant here. Oedipus puts out his own eyes because his reliance on his own sight and not the gods’ led him into error and caused him to disregard his own \textit{telos}, and thus his own nature. Teiresias, the blind seer in Sophocles’ \textit{Antigone}, undistracted by appearances, is guided physically by the untainted vision of an innocent boy and spiritually by the wishes of the gods. Finally, in Plato’s Cave Allegory (\textit{Republic Book VII}) the cave dwellers, not only reliant upon but also delighting in their physical vision, live in a world of shadows and illusion, all but one resisting the movement into the light of the intelligible universe and the source of truth. Arguably, this is the source of Plato’s notion of “separating” the soul from the body (e.g., in the \textit{Phaedo}), that is, not a literal separation or death but a recognition of the possibility of a larger view.

\textsuperscript{46} In St. Thomas a Kempis’ \textit{The Imitation of Christ}, one of Dickinson’s favorite books, he writes, “If you are looking for a knowledge and a learning that is useful to you, then love to be unknown and be esteemed as nothing” (Chapter 2.4) and, later, “Having left all things behind he should renounce himself, abandon himself completely, keeping nothing of his self-love, and when he has done all that he knows must be done, then let him realize that he has done nothing” (Chapter 11.4).
“what it is not” (this idea is also evident in “The Admirations and Contempts of Time,” which at the highest level of the soul’s dialectic, leads the soul to deliberately invert all of its functions).

One final observation assists the reader in understanding how the speaker of the poem understands the problem or virtue of renunciation. Not only is renunciation a virtue, but it is a “piercing” one. This idea coheres with the image of self-blinding and ego effacement in line 5, affirming particularly the cognate myth of Oedipus, but there is more than this to it: piercing is a way of cutting into a thing, or right through it, moving through or exposing the layers of the self that is wounded; thus, it is both wounding and revelatory at once. We are encouraged to think of Christ as another cognate image lying in the background of this poem, as He was pierced with the five wounds. Christ renounced neither matter nor humanity; instead, he recalled humanity to its telos in the midst of widespread misunderstanding about the nature of His kingdom. His vision was a justifying one, assigning or reaffirming a chain of precedence. Dickinson’s poem can be read as a relatively straightforward reflection of the ascetical principles that figure significantly throughout not only the ancient pagan tradition, but also in the Christian mystical tradition and the gospels.

47 See discussion in footnote 73 later in this chapter.

48 Gary Lee Stonum (The Dickinson Sublime) makes the excellent observation that the lacerating aspect associated with piercing in fact ironizes the commendatory sense of "valuably keen or emphatic" (63). The "commendatory" sense is one which I attached to "piercing" only in light of its subject, "Virtue," and not with respect to this other implicit meaning. Stonum’s observation highlights the sense in which, in the very piercing of eyes, one sharpens one’s vision in another sense.

49 The notion of cutting as a means of clarifying truth is also represented in the concluding lines of Plotinus’ Ennead V, 3, Ch. 17 where, in answering the question of how one is to procure an unimpeded vision of intelligible reality, he remarks, “Cut away everything.”
This willing sacrifice, then, of “presence,” “now,” material vision, the “itself” of the “I” and, finally, “here,” is also a correction of two movements in the Hegelian growth of spirit: the subject’s view of the object as flawed in the sense-certainty mode, and the painful dialectic of the unhappy consciousness. It represents one of the final movements of Soul toward absolute Spirit. In his gloss on Hegel, Findlay states,

Apparent knowledge in all its varied forms is the path taken by the natural consciousness till it reaches true knowledge. Along this path Soul becomes purified into Spirit: by a complete experience of itself it comes to know what it in itself is.

The truly positive nature of Dickinson’s vision of renunciation is also evident in a Hegelian sense as it is so clearly free of the affective problems attendant upon earlier stages of the growth of spirit. It is beyond the point at which “[c]onsciousness . . . retreats in terror from this endless self-transcendence, and [at which it] effects to regard all positions of thought as vain and empty, or as good in their own kind, thereby increasing its own vain self-importance.”

As has been shown, there are many irruptive moments in Dickinson’s poetry (especially those suggested in the section on the subject’s response to pain and in the Chapter on the interval) that particularly illumine the real state of the soul or self and demonstrate to it what its needs are, after which time the soul, having come to a fuller understanding of its own being, knows how to transcend itself and attune itself to a

50 Reading this poem alongside Dickinson’s 642, “Me – from Myself to banish –” (see Chapter 4) demonstrates that the “Renunciation” poem does see well beyond the fractures and negations of the unhappy consciousness.

51 Findlay, Analysis of Section 77, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 505.

52 Findlay, Analysis of Section 80, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 506.
proper, justified vision of the divine. This was shown clearly in my reading of the
“Renunciation” poem, in which renunciation was marked as a kind of self-piercing which
enacts in a fuller manner the intuitions of the soul in “There’s a certain slant of light.”
Dickinson recognizes the necessity of an orientation of seeing in this ultimate, mystical
sense in poem 1109, in which she identifies the via negativa as a vocation appropriate to
her and undertaken as a mission which purifies the “food” of others who are perhaps
unable to undertake such a mission into the dark:

I fit for them –
I seek the Dark
Till I am thorough fit.
The labor is a sober one
With this sufficient sweet
That abstinence of mine produce
A purer food for them, if I succeed,
If not I had
The transport of the Aim –

Dickinson’s use of the word “fit” in lines 1 and 2 is odd, but appropriate. She will adjust
herself “for them,” perhaps “fitting” her vision to correspond to the “dark” which, I have
shown, punctures all of reality. She will “seek the Dark” until she has achieved a
proficiency at dwelling in it or seeing through or in reference to it, until it becomes
natural to her as a sort of “fitness.” Simultaneously, she will do so until, perhaps, she is

53 See my reading of this poem in Chapter 5.
54 That this vocation is also, for her, a poetic one, is suggested in poem 833 (“The Poets light but lamps –
themselves go out”) and poem 448 (“This was a poet –”).
adequate to the dark, until she “fits” within it, desiring nothing and seeing nothing. This form of “abstinence” or renunciation is purgative for her and for those for whose sake she does it.\textsuperscript{55} This kind of insight is markedly similar, as I have noted, to traditional formulations of \textit{apophasis}. As Bernard McGinn notes, Nicholas of Cusa, in his work \textit{On The Vision of God} (1453), “insisted that God always remains a paradoxical ‘not seeing seeing’.”\textsuperscript{56} Nicholas of Cusa remarks,

\begin{quote}
. . . if someone wants to see you [God], his intellect must become ignorant and set in shadows . . . What surpasses all reason involves a contra-diction. Hence, when I assert the existence of the infinite, I admit a light that is dark, a knowledge that is ignorance, and something necessary that is impossible. . .\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

In an earlier poem, Dickinson intuited the degree to which entering into the darkness is an opportunity to develop a particular kind of fitness, attunement, or even justification. Poem 419 takes up the image of the self in darkness adjusting itself to the kinds of absence or shades of darkness it encounters, eventually “learn[ing] to see”:

\begin{quote}
We grow accustomed to the Dark
When Light is put away –
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Adrienne Rich (“Vesuvius at Home: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson,” \textit{Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson}, ed. Paul Ferlazzo) refers to Dickinson in relation to “a more ancient concept of the poet, which is that she has endeavored to speak for those who do not have the gift of language, or to see for those who—for whatever reasons—are less conscious of what they are living through” (194). Ben Kimpel (\textit{Emily Dickinson as Philosopher}. Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981) notes that Dickinson shares Plato’s ideals in the \textit{Republic} regarding the duty of the enlightened to share truth.

\textsuperscript{56} See also Plotinus, Ennead V, 3, 11: “sight not yet seeing.”

\textsuperscript{57} Quoted in Bernard McGinn, ed., \textit{The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism}, 347.
A Moment – We uncertain step
For newness of the night –
Then – fit our Vision to the Dark –
And meet the Road – erect –

And so of larger – Darknesses –
Those Evenings of the Brain –
When not a Moon disclose a sign –
Or Star – come out – within –

The Bravest – grope a little –
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead –
But as they learn to see –

Either the Darkness alters –
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight –
And Life steps almost straight.

The poet creates an analogy here between the sight’s response to literal darkness and the soul’s response to intelligible darkness. In the “newness” of night one moves with uncertainty, feeling his or her way; the best or “bravest” among those who dwell in this
darkness endure some degree of suffering rooted in misapproximation, “sometimes hit[ting] a Tree/ Directly in the Forehead.” Eventually, vision is “fit” to the Dark, and the sojourner walks “erect” upon the road. The tenor of this metaphor is metaphysical, spiritual, or intellectual darkness, “evenings of the Brain,” darkness unrelieved by either outward “signs” or internal intuitions of spiritual truth (“stars” within). However, as is the case with those in the mystical tradition who accept and even choose the dark, the speaker proclaims that one who persists “brave[ly]” in such darkness learns, paradoxically, to see, either as a function of a change in the darkness itself or by a change in the faculty of vision. This adjustment is much like the “fit” proposed in the previous poem, in which the speaker asserted that such seeing in the dark constituted a kind of “fitness,” a development of a faculty perhaps often avoided, or overlooked.

This poem also effectively speaks to the poem on renunciation which started this section and which proposed the “putting out of Eyes” as a way of avoiding a faulty estimation of the relative importance of earthly existence. More importantly, these two poems speak to each other in their mutual recognition of the extent to which “seeking,” “seeing into” the dark and “putting out [one’s] eyes” are acts of justification (she specifically uses the term “justify” in poem 745). “Step[ping] almost straight” and “meet[ing] the Road – erect –” are metaphors for justification. In what senses does she mean this? Is she deliberately playing with the Protestant notion of justification by faith, in which one walks by faith, and not by sight? She uses other cognate terms such as “fit,” “adjust,” and “justify,” often linking these terms with the concept of vision as properly

58 Ironically, but perhaps accidentally, this is exactly how Thomas Aquinas died in 1275 on his way to the Great Council in Constantinople which was called to heal the “Great Schism” between the Western and Eastern Churches (which has not yet been healed). Bonaventure also died before he could reach this Council.
relativized by intuitions of the transcendent. I think that Dickinson is ultimately transforming the Protestant notion of justification, albeit indirectly, from one which regards faith as a quality mediated often, but not always, by sight (i.e., signs) and aided by affect, into one in which justification or correction is aided by real praxis, by a mystical theology of seeing into the dark and knowing its contours. In Calvinism, by contrast, it is faith or election, not works, that count, no matter how much this might have been changing in Dickinson’s time.

Whatever the case, there is implicitly a broader scope of consciousness intimated in the above poem. It is not so much the “I” or “me” or “soul” or “mind” but “we” who “grow accustomed” in the experience of the “Neighbor” holding the lamp to witness her goodbye or ultimate self-limitation (i.e., death?).

Does this justify us in seeing in Dickinson’s notion of subjectivity a distinction between soul and spirit, such as we find in Hegel’s Phenomenology? As Findlay puts it, “. . .Soul is the truth of Matter, the truth that Matter has no truth. Soul is, however, only as yet the sleep of Spirit, the passive mind of Aristotle, which involves in itself the possibility of all forms of consciousness, without bringing such possibilities to active fulfillment.” Soul is therefore the individual-particular and the potential all. By contrast, Spirit is the fulfillment of the soul’s potential in the “we” of spiritual community that not only makes the Soul possible but actualizes its potentiality. As Quentin Laurer articulates,

‘Certainty’ is, so to speak, the assurance that there is nowhere

59 Recall also poem 765, which I dealt with more thoroughly in the previous chapter. In this poem, the speaker “adjust[s]/ [Her] slow idolatry” to “Himself” by inferring the importance of what is inaccessible or distant yet infinitely “removed” from what is accessible [Time].

60 Findlay, Hegel: A Re-Examination, 290.
else to look. Just as the failure of the objective stance to provide satisfaction had made consciousness ‘certain’ that it had nowhere to look but into itself, and the failure of the self-conscious stance to resolve satisfactorily the split between mere self-assurance and a recalcitrant reality over against it had revealed that there was nowhere else to look but in itself for reality, so now [at the end of the section on Reason, though we have seen indications in this thesis that Spirit is implicit in Soul earlier] the failure of individual reason to find within itself the reality it seeks shows it that there is nowhere else to look but into a more-than-individual consciousness. ‘We’ observers know that the only more-than-individual consciousness is ‘spirit,’ but consciousness has not yet experienced (emphasis Laurer) this. The experience. . . will gradually reveal itself as a movement toward becoming ‘spirit’ . . . (emphasis added).  

Spirit is the more-than-individual, the “we” that actualizes the multiple possibilities of soul by contrast with the Soul that is the individual, asleep in nature, needing to be awakened by Spirit to its universal potentialities.

Analysis of the following poems will help us to see the fuller developments of subjectivity in Dickinson’s poetry, especially the vertical axis of soul’s exposure to spirit

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61 See, for example, Chapter 5 “Traversing the Interval” and Hegel on the Freedom of Self-Consciousness in Section 198, Part B. Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness: “[t]his freedom of self-consciousness . . . appear[s] as a conscious manifestation in the History of Spirit…” (121).

62 Laurer, *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 177.
and vice versa, and to determine how far a soul-spirit distinction in the Hegelian sense is justified by the evidence.

**Soul and Spirit: The Vertical Axis of Dialectical Subjectivity**

In poem 365, Dickinson provides a setting for the forging of soul as the purest form of spirit:

Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?
Then crouch within the door -
Red - is the Fire’s common tint -
But when the vivid Ore
Has vanquished Flame’s conditions,
It quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the light
Of unanointed Blaze
Least Village has its Blacksmith
Whose Anvil’s even ring
Stands symbol for the finer Forge
That soundless tugs - within -
Refining these impatient Ores
With Hammer, and with Blaze
Until the Designated light
Repudiate the Forge -
What we see in this poem (and we are invited, indeed, to do so, even if we crouch on the threshold) is not the “moment” of creation of the soul or the fulfilled life in concert with its own internal trajectory. The metaphorical “Blacksmith” works with the “vivid Ore,” the raw material, out of a call from or response to a forge which is internal (“the finer Forge/ That soundless tugs - within -”) yet simultaneously, in a sense, external (a location of its forging (“unanointed Blaze,” every “Least Village” or Nazareth) and which it will abandon or “repudiate.”

“White Heat” or most purified, light-like spirit (*pneuma*: spirit and heat) is internal to the tension of the soul’s forging at the same time as it is its formal agent. This isn’t the end of the dialectic internal to the subject. The soul still “quivers” when it comes from the forge, but it is nonetheless purified by its victory over some level of dialectic, as it has “vanquished Flame’s conditions” (i.e., its “wink”ing,\(^{63}\) flickering quality as the unsteadiness of light is manifested in fire) and refined or transformed its

\(^{63}\) See also poem 242, which suggests the fulfillment or completion of soul in Spirit and vice versa, as is foreseen here: “no soul will wink” when the vertically transcendent vantage point provides a vista on which light shines as if on “mirrors,” reflecting only the purity of the Absolute from which it (soul) descedes:

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When we stand on the tops of Things –
And like the Trees, look down –
The smoke all cleared away from it –
And Mirrors on the scene –

Just laying light – no soul will wink
Except it have the flaw –
The Sound ones, like the Hills – shall stand –
No Lightning, scares away –

The Perfect, nowhere be afraid –
They bear their dauntless Heads,
Where others, dare not go at Noon,
Protected by their deeds –

The Stars dare shine occasionally
Upon a spotted World –
And Suns, go surer, for their Proof,
As if an Axle, held -
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material impulses (“Refining these Impatient Ores with Hammer”). So the repudiation of the forge is not like the soul casting off spirit in some newfound independence, but rather like the soul’s baptism that marks its “designation.” Designation here is an unusual word because it signifies, on the one hand, that soul is now marked, for a particular purpose; on the other hand, this is a “de-sign-ation;” it is the act of stripping a thing or entity of all of its marks. Both senses surprisingly can cohere in this single poem in relation to both the identity and the activity of spirit. The movement from “red [which] is the fire’s common Tint” to the colorless “Light of unanointed Blaze” is such a process of both designation and de-signation. In the first case, it brings soul into its own nature; and in the second, it brings soul into its own qualitylessness or absence of specific determination. Dialectic has not disappeared here. This call and response between soul and spirit, though on one level completed in this poem in the forging and repudiation of

64 In contrast, Wendy Barker (“Emily Dickinson and poetic strategy,” The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2002) 83) suggests that “this is an internal heat that turns a formerly solid, rigid shape into liquid, a transforming fire that changes ‘utterly’ . . . what is within the forge has become molten, liquid, devoid of rigid boundaries . . . open to being reshaped into a new form—open to possibility.” Although I agree that this is in some sense an unforming, in so far as it is a “de-signation,” I also wish to focus attention on the fact that this is also a process of reshaping (designation) which is only possible in the poem because of the dialectical, intersubjective resonance with Spirit.

65 In a somewhat different reading, Sharon Cameron (Lyric Time) suggests that, in keeping with the Doctrine of Preparation of New England Puritanism, “Dickinson’s poem frames the self under its own siege of fire” in a process of conversion that continues “until death (that designation for the final conversion) puts out the mortal light in the brilliance of its own inextinguishable shine” (199).

Paula Bennett (Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet) sees this poem as a deviant (not theologically conventional) rendering of “soul’s trials,” as Dickinson’s “concern is not with preparing her soul to receive grace. It is with describing the way in which the soul is empowered through its capacity to survive and transcend pain” (124). While I agree with Bennett that an explicitly theological framework is missing in this poem, there is still an intersubjective aspect implied in it that moves it well beyond a poem in which “the transaction is entirely between the soul and its own experience, experience which ‘redeems’ it, but only, it seems, in a secular sense” (124-5). In my view, redemption and suffering are not specifically the focus at all. Bennett might be partly right, nonetheless, in dimly perceiving that this is in some way about the soul and its own experience. I would qualify this to say that, in so far as soul is in spirit and spirit is in soul (as is evident in the poems to come and as is vaguely prefigured here), soul could in some sense be thought to be initiated into its other aspect through the blacksmith’s forging.
the forge, is not subsumed/consumed within soul itself in its sensitive, receptive quivering.

As in the previous poem, poem 945 suggests a similar notion that spirit is implicit within brain/mind and soul prior to its growth and emergence in a form in which it can be recognized by consciousness:

There is a Blossom of the Brain -
A small - italic Seed
Lodged by Design or Happening
The Spirit fructified -

Shy as the Wind of its Chambers
Swift as a Freshet’s Tongue
So of the Flower of the Soul
Its process is unknown.

When it is found, a few rejoice
The Wise convey it Home
Carefully cherishing the spot
If other Flower become.

When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God,
Upon his Breast, a closing Soul
The Flower of our Lord.

If it is Spirit’s nature to blow and germinate seeds where it may and not to contain itself within “chambers,” then regardless of intelligent design or chance, spirit implants itself, finds its lodging in the brain as its potential “Blossom,” designated “italic”66 seed, and the “Flower of the Soul,” all of which are the “Spirit Fructified.” The process of getting from the seed to the “Flower of Soul” is “unknown.”

The unusual formulation in this poem is the articulation of the fullness or “Fructification” of Spirit in Mind or Soul not at the level of the “Flower of Soul,” but primarily at the level of the seed itself. This suggests, as does the remainder of the poem, that the mutuality that exists between the germinal soul and spirit itself is absolutely essential in the development of the subject as it moves into spirit (or spirit into it). The Mind or the Soul is not merely a passive, receptive instrument, but something in the subject must be willing to seek and recognize what is already within it as a germinal aspect in order to “convey it Home.”

In Dickinson’s poem 1651, the function of the Spirit is invoked, as in the previous two poems, as a formative activity both in and through matter that nonetheless must find with matter, or “Flesh,” a sense of correspondence, recognition, and “consent.” Such consent, operating from the side of matter, implies the mutuality between matter and spirit and spirit’s presence within matter, something I have argued is evident as a proposition in Dickinson’s poetry as she explores all stages of the development of the subject.

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66 Charles Anderson (Stairway of Surprise) notes that “italic” is the “type used for foreign borrowings” (63), but does not comment further except to say that “the novelty of this adjective redeems the triteness of the seed-flower metaphor.” In contrast, I suggest that the “italic” seed is in fact its designated quality that marks it already as having both a beginning and a telos in Spirit.
A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength -

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He -
“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language

This loved Philology?

Dickinson employs here the drama of the incarnation as the type and initiating manifestation of spirit in individual existence—the food tasted by “each one of Us.” A reading of this poem is initially complicated by several matters: first, the unmistakeable reference to the incarnation, the “Word made Flesh,” seems to transmute into a statement, either literal or metaphorical, about the rarity with which one engages in the Eucharist, or Christian communion, the body of Christ in the transubstantiated wafer being the “Word
made Flesh.” The speaker goes on to question her initial claim, it appears, which is that such acts are “seldom” and reverent (“tremblingly partook”); she asks, “But have I not mistook.” The poet’s possible meaning bifurcates here—she could be asking whether the conventional reverence attributed to the incarnation and its eucharistic manifestation is a mere fiction, in which case her initial assessment is a mere misapproximation, or she could be using the word “mistook” not as “been mistaken,” but, rather, as a foil to “partook” in line 2, suggesting that she questions whether she has *transgressed* personally in either the manner or the attitude of her partaking. This suggestion of possible transgression is perhaps unpacked in lines 6-8, in which the “tast[ing]” of the Word made Flesh is undertaken with secretive, guilty delight—“ecstasies of stealth”—without, it appears, a proper, careful regard for the powerful effect of such food, a food which is “debated/ To our specific strength” (another question of fit and adequacy). This further implies the problem of a simultaneous weakness or inadequacy of the fleshly person who ingests this word.

The “power” implicit in the Word itself, not yet manifest in the flesh (as revealed in stanza 2, the eternal life—or, for the subject, the promise of the immortality of the soul) is negatively conceived as a loss of function for Spirit (a loss of the “power to die”) insofar as it is undescended into matter. The speaker of the poem ironically regards (and perhaps here she is in concert with Hegel) the drama of Spirit thinking itself as fundamentally incomplete without its entrance into the messy horizontal dialectical field,

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67 Gary Lee Stonum (*The Dickinson Sublime*) stresses that this is true also on the level which implicates the reader in language: “the work naturally fits our specific strength. . . the uncanny match perhaps suggests that the word’s power depends on how strongly we can respond to it” (97).
a field of matter ("flesh") and also of indistinct articulation. The Word that *does* have the power to die (both Christ incarnate and "words" themselves) is only the descended word which redeems both *in* and *through* death.

The second stanza of the poem thus opens up the text to another level of signification that both stretches beyond and yet is internal to the primary level established in stanza 1 (the incarnation and the Eucharistic participation of believers). Now, the reader is led to consider the transmission of the "Word," both through Christ and through eucharist, as something that is implicitly transformed in the process of digestion by the subject into "language" itself (this metaphor is enabled by the metaphor of the final three lines). Thus Christ, the Word as an intermediary of Spirit, becomes in the subject a love of the *logos*, of poetry itself as the subject’s internal manifestation of Spirit. However, as I have already noted in relation to the opening lines of the second stanza, the descent of the Word into matter leads Spirit or the Word itself into a dismemberment, but perhaps one through which the subject "finds" itself. Clearly, the descent of the Word into mere "language," albeit a language that consents to being a vessel for the Word, is a condescension in two senses: it is a fall into the horizontal dialectics of subjectivity in so far as the language of the flesh is by comparison indistinct and inarticulate (in which case the "consent of language," although likened to Mary’s consent to be a vessel for the

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68 As Stallo suggests in his famous essay "Understanding Hegel," for Hegel "there is no dualism between matter and form in the Absolute." Thus Spirit, in not descending, or here, in the poem, "concedescending," is free of the life/death struggle of the subject. Without Spirit articulating itself in matter, the subject is static and perhaps unredeemable, in so far as dialectic is a process of continual refinement and self-redemption.

69 Charles Anderson (Stairway of Surprise, 41-3) takes note of the sacramental/Eucharistic context and Dickinson’s exploration of the Gospel of John (especially 1:1) to conclude: “Emily Dickinson saw the dramatic force [of John’s statement about the *logos*] and seized upon it for her own purposes, to suggest the miracle by which created thought is bodied forth in language.” Although I agree with Anderson, I think the poem is more than a metaphor for which poetry is the vehicle; indeed, as is so often true in Dickinson, even in metaphor or analogy she rethinks important ideas on both sides of the image, symbol, metaphor, etc.
Word, is the consent of what is already sullied), and it is a condescension in the sense that while the Word (as Christ) may be secure in the indestructibility of its own nature (carrying the sense of condescension as merely gestural, risking nothing from its privileged vantage point), its movement toward and into matter is also real (as condescension is also a stooping to matter). 70

Although this is a poem which works on many levels, it is in the final analysis mostly about the sense in which language is the unpurified vessel into which pure Spirit descends into the subject. 71 The inadequacy of language to contain or express the fullness of the Word is hinted at here, in spite of the receiver’s love of the logos; only if language can “breathe” as “distinctly” as the Word itself, or as pure Spirit can (as spirit = breath (pneuma)), is eternity assured. Linda Munk proposes, “Wordplay is one way back to the garden of primary meanings. If words can indeed be directed back to their source, and if that source—to follow Emerson—is the mind of God, then etymology would be a sacred exercise, and so would religious wordplay . . . In theory, then, lexicons, as images or types of God’s mind, are sacred texts. And what Dickinson called ‘this consent of language/ This loved Philology’ was for her, a way to see God and live.” 72 Munk’s

70 Gerard Manley Hopkins’ reflection on the notion of “condescension” in the incarnation is illuminating here, especially as it stresses what is at stake for divinity and humanity: “I think the trivialness of life is, and personally to each one, ought to be seen to be, done away with by the Incarnation – or, I shd. say the difficulty wh. the trivialness of life presents ought to be. It is one adorable point of the incredible condescension of the Incarnation (the greatness of which no saint can have ever hoped to realize) that our Lord submitted not only to the pains of life . . . but also to the mean and trivial accidents of humanity” (quoted in Linda Munk, The Trivial Sublime, 7).

71 Joanne Fiet Diehl (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination) suggests otherwise: “The competition between Christ’s love and Philology ends in her choosing the consent of language. Appropriating theological language to her alternative poetics, Dickinson signals her antinomian intent. The poet’s Word displaces the Christian Logos as power inheres within” (125). I argue, rather, that the theological language cannot be effectively disentangled from the language that could be said to be implicitly about poetry to the extent that the poem says something about both and their relatedness.

72 Munk, The Trivial Sublime, 106.
premise is not so far from my own, and amplifies the appropriateness of the “trembling” with which the poem begins.

The poem captures, then, the paradoxical nature of both the incarnate Christ (indeed, of the entire Trinity) and of the process of redemption through the word; it is the paradox of the self-circumscribing action implied in the relationship between what is infinite and what is finite. Dickinson does not allow the aspect of death to magically disappear from this drama. The only way redemption can occur is if the human subject can be bound by its vertical aspect and thus achieve true intersubjectivity (this is the “cohesive” power of Spirit); however, in effecting this binding, the Spirit-as-Word risks death. Further, the poet regards perhaps the full articulation of Spirit, of Spirit thinking itself, as partially dependent upon the poet as a crucible for the pure Word which must pass through troubled matter.

Finally, then, the reason for the poet’s opening assertion becomes clear. To partake of the “Word made Flesh,” in so far as the subject may be inadequate to the

73 In this specific sense, Hegel is implicitly useful. Stallo represents Hegel as suggesting that, contrary to conventional understanding, we mistakenly attribute absolute independence to the Infinite: “Everyone is prepared to admit, in case of necessity, that the Finite exists not without mediation; but to predicate this mediation of the Infinite, likewise, runs counter to all our habitual ideas. The exclusion of all mediation is usually considered as the very criterion of the Infinite; and this is a prejudice of which we must divest ourselves. The Infinite is not without the Finite; it is, indeed, the negation of the Finite, but in this negation the Finite is indispensably expressed and contained” (in Goetzmann, 1973, 99). This provides also a useful comparison with Emerson’s “The OverSoul” (210).

We can usefully also compare two aspects of the necessary interrelationship of infinite and finite in Dickinson. First, poem 1646, lines 1-4, on the inescapability of immortality: “Why should we hurry – why indeed?/ When every way we fly/ We are molested equally/ By immortality.”

Second, poem 906 on the “Compound Vision” of “Light – enabling Light – The Finite – furnished with the Infinite – Convex – and Concave Witness – Back – toward Time – And forward – Toward the God of Him.” In this image of the Resurrection, we have two lenses, the convex focusing light downwards through an incarnational Christ, and the concave reflecting reciprocally light upwards and into Christ (“through an Open Tomb”). This is also a rupture of the temporal, material, horizontal interval. As long as the Tomb is closed, there is no rupture in that interval. Opened, the Tomb becomes an aperture through which light passes and creates these inversions of vision we can see in the first stanza (“as it were a Height –…”). At the same time, it is a redemption of history, healing the wound of history and subsuming it in the movement forward “toward the God of Him” without in any way annulling or annihilating it (“The Finite – furnished with the Infinite”). See also poem 242 (quoted on p. 212, note 63).
transmission of this manifestation of Spirit, is conceived by the subject as potentially
destructive on some level to Spirit (and thus to the individual soul which is implicated in
Spirit) who must descend and risk death or, in Hegelian terms, in becoming the “abstract,
defective Infinite” by entering into “mutual relation with this,” the Finite.\(^7\) The poet thus
questions whether she properly regards this drama, and her part in it as a partaker and as a
transformer of the word, in its fullest implications. (This may nonetheless represent in
some manner the final movement of soul-spirit, the movement into true intersubjectivity,
achieved, both in soul itself and in poetry as a manifestation).

**Conclusion**

We have analyzed in this chapter the problematic nature of soul’s relation to
subjectivity and the precarious and profound nature of emergent subjectivity that seems,
on the one hand, to include or subsume soul, mind, spirit, consciousness—even the “I,”
“me,” or “we” (of ambiguous community between poet and reader or, perhaps, the larger
community of ‘spirit’ in a Hegelian sense)—and, on the other hand, to underscore
Dickinson’s conviction that the transcendent transfixes even ordinary experience with its
flight, light or slants. We then went on to analyze the phenomena of self-limitation and,
then, in a more developed sense, of self-renunciation in Dickinson’s thought. In the first
case, this is the soul’s activity of self-limitation or adjustment of its capacity in the face
of the transcendent infinite and, in the second, this is the soul, mind, and spirit’s capacity
to give up itself and its own preferences more radically in order to become equal to the
missing “All.” In renouncing its own preferences and limiting or adjusting its field of

\(^7\) Stallo, “Understanding Hegel,” 98.
negotiation, subjectivity completes and recapitulates what were at earlier stages painful, apparently passive moments of absence, blankness, and blindness. In this light, the final part of this chapter has examined these self-defining acts of soul as cohering with Hegel’s development of “Spirit”\textsuperscript{75}, and at the same time with the \textit{via negativa} and modes of apophasis that are related to the traditions associated with Christian mysticism and Neoplatonism.

Subjectivity, in Dickinson, is certainly more comprehensive and fluid than the traditional terms “soul,” “mind,” and “spirit,” even though the Hegelian sense of Spirit, Infinite and Universal, is certainly intimated by Dickinson’s poetry. In a real sense, however, her poetry stands at a pivotal juncture between traditional terms and understanding of selfhood and the emergence of a new modern subjectivity (related to that of Hegel) without belonging exclusively to either. Earlier features of selfhood—such as soul, body, spirit and Hegelian treatments of an individual soul development into the more-than-individual spirit that is already implicit in soul’s earliest stages—are transformed in Dickinson’s phenomenology of subjectivity at the heart of which there lies a complex poetics as we have seen especially in poem 1651 (“A Word made Flesh”).

\textsuperscript{75} Namely, the more-than-individual, the universal, the we-as-community established as the “other” pole of a particular soul.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

My reading of Dickinson’s poetry is, as I indicated at the outset, neither conventional nor entirely novel. I have argued against seeing her poetry exclusively as a direct reflection of Puritanism; as an expression of the restricted feminine identity available for her time; or as a reaction against the strict laws governing the domestic sphere in her own family. I have even tried to argue against the notion that her poetry is a manifestation of a distinctive skepticism, on the one hand, or of a particular sensibility, religious, philosophical or theological, on the other. Instead, what we actually find in Dickinson’s poetry is what I have described a phenomenological poetics of subjectivity, a poetics created organically as the poet participates in a working-out of the internal-external processes of a self-articulating subject. This, I have suggested, is a new view of subjectivity that stands at the juncture of modernity and the traditions from which it emerges. Dickinson’s voice has a unique cast that to a significant degree shapes, questions, rejects and yet always transforms what is given to it by earlier ages. At the same time, against the view that Dickinson and Hegel cannot be seriously compared, I have shown that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the dialectic that propels and incarnates it resonates strongly at different points with Dickinson’s phenomenology of poetic subjectivity, though I have also insisted upon the differences between the two (indeed, the striking difference—among others—between a “philosophical” poetry and a narrative philosophy must be emphasized) and upon Dickinson’s independent reflection on, and incorporation of, elements of the Platonic/Neoplatonic and the ascetic,
theological and mystical Christian traditions, as well as, of course, the influential work of Emerson and others.

Though I have set out a theoretical scholarly framework in the Introduction, I have tried as a methodological principle to move invariably from the text to broader theoretical considerations (rather than vice-versa from theory to praxis) in order to situate my analysis firmly in Dickinson’s own thought and expression. I have also made my readings as transparent as possible, providing alternative trajectories of interpretation so that the reader can at least see why I go in a particular direction on the basis of those trajectories. I also give some comparative scholarly perspective at important points, though I have for the most part restricted this to the footnotes in order to make the work as accessible and straightforward as possible. I have shown that Dickinson’s poetry is to a significant degree self-reflexive and metapoetic and that it articulates a poetics of subjectivity in a novel and, at least partly, original way. In these poems, the reader witnesses “the soul thinking itself.” This process is one in which the reader is implicitly invited to partake because of its very fluidity and its being-in-process, even as it sometimes results in existential entrapment for both speaker and reader. While Dickinson uses the term “soul” in many different ways (as animating principle, thinking subject, bearer of inner experience, consciousness, self-consciousness), it is clear in her poetry that soul is part of a larger unfolding subjectivity that includes many other perspectives such as mind, spirit, “me”, “I”, “myself” etc.

The elements or different layers of this poetics are analyzed in chapters 2 to 6 and are, in broad terms, as follows. First, I examine the dialectical doubleness of perception, pervaded by pain, lacking closure, and liable to distortion, which constitutes subjectivity.
Second, I explore the ineradicable experiences of absence, desire, blank and negation that not only frame her poetry but constitute, even threaten to eclipse, the perceiving subject.

Third, I focus on the movement from consciousness to self-consciousness, never that of a pure subjective rationality, but integrally inclusive of feeling to the point of unhappiness—a self-consciousness or developing subjectivity caught between the opposed and apparently irreconcilable poles of its experience of self and otherness.

Fourth, I survey the all-important slants, angles, intervals or spacings, often overlooked or simply treated amorphously as simple absence or negation, that both make possible yet also problematise the irruption of the transcendent that is so important for Dickinson’s poetics of subjectivity. It is through these particular structures that she seems to meditate upon a whole tradition of thought going back to Plato and simultaneously to anticipate later theoretical developments in Modernism and Post-Modernism. And finally, I consider the nature of soul for Dickinson or, in fact, the broader field of subjectivity itself that includes or even occasionally subsumes terms or “faculties” such as body, soul, mind, spirit, consciousness—or again, the “me”, the “I”, or the “we” of an essentially inter-subjective field—and to reach into the wider world of cohesive “Spirit.” Spirit, I have argued, is the apparently more-than-individual in a perhaps Hegelian sense, without ever losing sight of individual experience. No mediated or unmediated “Absolutes” appear naively in this experience, since self-limitation and self-renunciation are crucial features of such a poetics, as is also the incarnation-experience manifested paradigmatically in Mary’s assent and in the figure of Christ that, for Dickinson, makes possible a poetics of the “word.”
Each chapter, then, identifies an important layer of Dickinson’s poetics from perception to the fuller range of subjectivity and emphasizes both the negative and the positive sides of her poetics. *Both* sides have to be acknowledged fully, in my view. Let me articulate this progression in more detail, emphasizing what I take to be the most important features of her thought.

Emily Dickinson’s poetic treatment of perception is, like that of Hegel, strikingly dialectical in several different modalities. At the core of the dialectic, perception generates an absence or a negativity that implicitly undermines the naive confidence that the object exists simply in its own particular sphere—stable, self-contained, and self-identical. Once the subject or self comes to recognize this disjuncture, he or she witnesses the dissolution of that initial dialectical moment, and instead of positing the flaw as originating in the faculty of perception, is cast into a new dialectic in which the object of perception itself is understood to contain a duality that is pervaded by its own nihilating character. The resultant phenomenology of perception functions as a quivering dialectic, I have suggested, that fails to rest in either assent or denial, but which nonetheless yields a vague intuition of a movement toward a higher principle, even if this intuition is itself permeated by negation. Here, Dickinson recognizes the need for a range of faculties to combine in the virtue or excellence of perceiving well and to assist the self in enduring the vagaries and distortions that characterize the act of perception. In this we see two simultaneous tendencies in her thought. On the one hand, she implicitly evokes the transcendent even at the level of perception, suggesting the possibility of some liberation from the subject-object complex, and yet at the same time never evading the negativity at the heart of perception that frustrates the transcendent impulse. On the other
hand, as I have argued in the section on pain and the distortion of perception, this implicit transcendent dimension allows her to examine the extreme dialectical oscillations that threaten to eclipse the self altogether in pain, and yet different dimensions of subjectivity continue to operate, if only implicitly—such as the “I,” the “me,” the “soul,” the brain, and the strings and bow or bodily mechanism, and the small, narrow ego. On this reading, subjectivity is inevitably a doubling or double-seeing at many different levels of an evolving or devolving self, at the lowest level an ego that is threatened with the horror of extinction, and at other levels, a premonition of the stage of self-consciousness in which mind, faith, and prosthetic prudence interplay. The prudent microscope cannot foreclose the field of perceptual experience and rescue itself prematurely from the nausea and incommensurabilities of a dialectic that oscillates between the apparent conviction of sense-perception and the apparent security of the active transcendent.

Dickinson’s treatment of absence, negation, and blank is a striking and pervasive feature of her thought. Her thinking is in fact organically negative—that is, it often begins with gaps, absences, and voids in the process of construing the patterns which give form to her perceptions. In one respect, as I have suggested, this may be interpreted as what Keats might have meant by “negative capability,” namely, the ability of the gifted artist to create a blank space or receptive emptiness within the self as a template for the birth or emergence of new forms. On the other hand, her thinking, while in tune with this, seems to go beyond it, since she constantly recognises the necessity of absence as a psychological counterpoint to the affirmation of concrete reality. Thus, at the root of her negative thinking is a dialectic through which an absence becomes a presence, which becomes, subsequently, yet another absence, one more stark and profoundly realized than
the initial one, but which nonetheless provides contours to the void of absence itself. Furthermore, it is at the root of Dickinson’s negative thinking that we find not only a dialectical consideration of absence and presence, infinitude and finitude, minuteness and grossness, life and death, boundary and unboundedness, one and many, but also a doubleness of identity lying at the root of self, a potentially self-correcting duplicity, but also a doubleness that tends toward self-cancelling and, at worst, effacement of a recognizable self or subject.

Chapter 3 showed that Dickinson is concerned with not merely the absence or negation in things themselves, but with absence as an integral form of desire pervading all aspects of consciousness and, at the same time, projecting consciousness outside of itself, because of its very lack, into the abyss or no-thingness of otherness, namely, in a simultaneously positive and negative sense, projecting it to the threshold of self-consciousness. Such a projection, I have also argued, even if it only compels the imagination to conceive of alternative, indeed, opposed states of being, can suggest the redemption of failed perception; but this should not be taken in my view to translate into a thoroughly religious vision or to reduce Dickinson’s nuanced presentations of absence to the crusty preferences of an austere spinster or to the exclusively apophatic theological discourse attributed to Neoplatonism. Nor is it simply an apophasis concerned only with language itself and its propensities to undo or unsay itself. Rather, absence as desire (though of course this permeates implicitly all levels of reality from the material to the spiritual) is at this pivotal existential and psychological level of perceptual cognitive experience both a spur or incitement to ideation and thought and a perplexity or restless slumber of spirit that stays unfulfilled even in its desire. Absence may even lead to a
downgrading of desire, as we saw in poem 355, if absence is realized in the self as a fundamental brokenness: the psyche has to readjust its reference point from the exceptional or idealized perfect to the merely normal, that is, toward simple wholeness, not necessarily transcendence. All of this indicates that Dickinson’s radical treatment of absence should not be translated either purely into any single monolithic discourse (theological, denominational, radically skeptical or otherwise) or any single dualistic bifurcation (as for example a dualistic division between spirit and matter). Here Hegelian thought, I have suggested, is a useful antidote to single static binary oppositions, for it rejects the division between spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence and, instead, focuses attention upon the emergence of the subject in an already inter-subjective world of spirit.

For Dickinson, who was so attuned to the possibilities implicit in absence, a phenomenological approach to subjectivity is large enough to abolish both the absolute solid security of stable objects (whether material or eternal) and a self-satisfied quasi post-modern ambivalence. What we seem to see in the poems analyzed in chapter 3 is the emergence of a new phenomenology of subjectivity that resonates with Hegel, a phenomenology in which the subject is not substance (whether material stuff or intellectual foundation) but the oscillation of different aspects of its being in all of which absence plays a decisive role.

Chapter 4 adds a decisive further layer to the drama of emergent subjectivity, namely, the movement, already implicit in perception, beyond simple consciousness into self-consciousness, and particularly the unhappy consciousness. From a reading of some paradigmatic poems, I have shown how the perceptive self moves through different
layers of dialectical negation and becomes a self-thinking subject. I have also explored what is articulated in that movement; namely, the urge to establish not only a continuous, secure framework for the self, but also the deeper underlying fluctuations that implicitly undergird this dialectical urge, particularly, the all-important life-and-death struggle (as in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic) that occurs on several different levels of consciousness, propelling the self-conscious subject, thus awakened, beyond itself and beyond what appears to be the relative security and yet limitations of the daily self.

On the one hand, it is part of the tragedy of the self to recognize ultimately that any act of subjugation, any attempt at complete freedom and independence, is also an act of abdication, just as in the master-slave dialectic the master becomes bound by the very dependent being he requires. On the other hand, as we saw in poem 642, all is not lost. Although it is a meditation on both internal unity and dissolution, the poem’s overarching consciousness, the “I,” of stanzas 1 and 2, does not dissolve for the reader; it remains a mediating term that does not fully descend into the dialectical shifts, but stands above and potentially in them, evaluating its own paradoxes and testing hypotheses of being without being swallowed up by them.

In this way, the self-conscious subject is propelled into the dialectical drama of psychic self-identity as such, with its own challenges, negations, and limitations. Here, partial consciousness finds itself cast into a vastness that characterizes the eternal, and it becomes simultaneously a stranger to itself and yet, strangely enough, more purely spiritual in its own nature, even as it remains overawed and terrified in its partiality (as in Hegel’s further but complementary stage of Stoicism, Skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness, caught between the eternal, unchangeable and the unsatisfying condition
of its own changeability and partiality). Finally, we examined the drama of the mutually-effacing action through which each pole of self-consciousness attempts to constitute itself as self-dependent and the fear or dread implicit therein. For Dickinson, this fear is a reflection of the meeting with death in three different senses: first, the contemplation of death as an external fact; second, the transformation of consciousness into the awareness of death; and, third, the confrontation with death, and indeed the acceptance of death, as an inner necessity. For Dickinson, this is part of the fabric of self-consciousness itself that, as in Hegel, is not left behind in the master-slave dialectic but characterizes the essential nature of consciousness at any level. This mutually-effacing action and its attendant dread do not sacrifice the intensity of feeling to any supposed superiority of rationality. In Dickinson’s poetics, as we noted above, feeling and thought remain parts of an ongoing dialectical struggle. She never attempts to subjugate strongly felt emotion to an explicitly rational framework. She never allows herself to completely intellectualize pain—but she does sometimes use the split voice or the speaker’s perspective to suggest an order or a context through which pain might be better comprehended.

Chapter 5 adds a further dimension to Dickinson’s poetics of subjectivity—not so much another progressive layer of subjectivity, but rather the opening and limiting conditions of its existence and experience. At the same time, it provides a new understanding of the nature of absence, desire and negation we examined in chapter 2, but from a more developed perspective.

Chapter 5 explores the intriguing logical and metaphysical connections between slants, angles, and the indirect irruption of the transcendent in the life of consciousness,
on the one hand, and the intervals or spacings that consciousness must traverse as a result
of the implications this has for a dialectics of subjectivity in Dickinson’s poetry. My
analysis of Dickinson’s varied usage of “slants” of light and also of the angled road, of
paradox and the manifestation of truth shows several important features of her thought.
First, it shows her subtle awareness of the utterly disorienting and yet transfixing
irruption of the transcendent that does not follow the trajectories of ordinary experience
but punctures them from a perspective which is entirely other. Second, it shows that in
puncturing them, at the same time, it renders incapable the ready separation of normal
ordering faculties of the human being such as mind, yet in a significant way signals to the
subject the usefulness of deliberately limiting one’s frame of perception in the approach
to truth and of employing an oblique perspective which replicates the transcendent’s own
trajectory. Here the subject replicates in its own self-adjustment a kind of receptive
adequateness appropriate to the growth or maturation of spirit. Third, against the view
that Dickinson somehow yearns for an unmediated grasp of things in themselves, my
analysis shows that the indirect or oblique approach to light or truth, rather than any
immediate manifestation, requires the human being to traverse the indirect interval or
refraction of truth in consciousness itself; in other words, while divine light might be
immediate or without interval in itself, human consciousness must traverse the interval,
but in such a way that it is open to the indirect perforation of the transcendent.

Intervals or in-betweenness, therefore, assumes a major prominence for Dickinson,
not simply because it problematises the existence of “solid” terms such as “I”, “me”,
“soul” etc., but because they cut subjectivity open to the possibility of multidimensional
existence, especially to interval as verticality. Here I identified three important valences
that one can trace in Dickinson’s poetry for understanding the traversable interval more deeply: the interval “overcome” but only as an illusion or disengagement of the subject; the interval transformative, which designates interval as the space across which legitimate maturation of consciousness can occur; and the interval transformed, which suggests the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical that effectively liberates, or prefigures the liberation of, the subject from the constraint of a purely horizontal dialectic in the mystery of the incarnation and the resurrection.

The major findings of this chapter seem to me to be absolutely crucial for understanding Dickinson’s poetry because they genuinely illuminate the complex nature of dialectic at every level, the inherent plausible skepticism of Dickinson herself, exposed in the context of the doubleness of consciousness, the troubled, negative and yet positive nature of human subjectivity itself, and yet also her religious confidence in the midst of such experiences transfixed by the transcendent and redeemed by the mystery of grace and divine life. They are also crucial because they predicate the insufficiency of states of being that foreclose or too rigidly circumscribe the nature of truth, because these states also prefigure, however dimly, more developed aspects of subjectivity in which consciousness willingly, or even reluctantly, readjusts its vision or perspective, carefully paring away what is extraneous to its real subjectivity, in order to access truth in its fuller dimensions.

Finally, Chapter 6 takes up the much broader task of situating soul within the mediating perspectives of consciousness, perception, self-consciousness, mind, and self-replicating spirit first, to determine what the soul could be thought to mean and what its
functions or capacities might be for Dickinson and, second, to analyze the qualities or activities of self-limitation.

Here I analyzed the problematic nature of soul’s relation to subjectivity and the precarious and profound nature of emergent subjectivity that seems, on the one hand, to include or subsume soul, mind, spirit, consciousness—even the “I,” “me,” or “we” (of ambiguous community between poet and reader or, perhaps, the larger community still of “spirit” in a Hegelian sense) and, on the other hand, to underscore Dickinson’s conviction that the transcendent transfixes even ordinary experience with its flight, light or slants. There are no easy answers, I argued, to the ambiguities of subjectivity precisely because subjectivity is neither substance nor thing but an in-betweenness that resists structure.

Poem 1090, for instance, interrogates the question of inheritance—not only of body or soul, but of faith. What is ours, and what is not ours? If we do own or possess a body and soul, to what project are we committing ourselves? Our own resources? What does it mean for our identity, and our conception of free will? The tone of the poem emphasizes the fears of the victim of the inheritance, yet the ending also allows for the possibility that the weight of inheritance is also a realization of what the infinitude of both spiritual and material existence really means: not a static, encapsulated belief, but a divine territory to traverse as part of one’s birthright.

We are left with the question (among others) of what weight to give the apparent distinction between the “I” and the soul and body. Is the “I” something different from soul-body? Is it the “mind” or “spirit” conceived in some way as “above” the compound being? Or is it the self-reflexive subject that in some sense directs or reflects upon organic life, a subject that is nonetheless troubled by its weight? And is the subject as
such that phenomenological self that “authors” the poem and is most aware of the divine frontier it in some sense is related to? There are no easy answers to these questions, though we may suppose that the “I” or subject (if it be so) is perhaps the broader subjective mind or spirit of the reflective poet.

Similarly, in poem 1576, we find a highly ambivalent view of the apparent Spirit/mind-body problem posed in the stark existential experience of the phenomenological “self” that speaks the poem. The reflecting self seems to comprehend the spirit-mind/body structure and yet it may only falsely believe that it is not fully coterminous with, or even subordinate to some part of that compound existence. Any attempt to wrestle some hierarchical or organic structure out of this phenomenological dialectic of subjectivity seems arbitrary.

Again, in poem 384 consciousness is a faculty, force, or activity which occupies a mediating position between the two “bodies” of the poem. Whether the soul is held captive alongside the suffering body or whether it is liberated to act as a stable, secure source of equity for selfhood is dependent upon consciousness—that appears as somehow a “term between” which is identified entirely with neither body nor soul.

I showed in the first part of this chapter, then, that for Emily Dickinson, identity, that is, sameness or continuity over time and the equation of self with one or more apparent components of one’s being, is both profound and precarious, which is to say that she does not reject identity as a problem or question profoundly worth pursuing, while she recognizes the tenuousness of tying one’s apparent being to any single stable entity, since all can be overturned or questioned further. Neither mind nor spirit, neither soul nor body, seems to account for the fluid depth of reflective subjectivity; and even the I or
me, no matter how much “they” may seem to organize all other elements in the purview of human consciousness, are not above the fray of experience, like some transcendental guarantee of identity. The divine and the infinite are undoubtedly there throughout, but for human consciousness the divine seems to be a frontier of new existence, intimated but never made into a thing in the Infinite Finite of human experience. At the same time, even when Dickinson is caught in these problematic stages of self-articulation, there is nonetheless an underlying confidence that the “All” exists, that she knows what she is missing and that the transcendent transfixes even ordinary experience with its flight or light.

We then went on to analyze, first, the phenomenon of self-limitation and, second, in a more developed sense, that of self-renunciation in Dickinson’s thought. Dickinson regards the subject as deliberately curtailing its own modes of attention and existence for the sake of adjusting or attuning itself to a transcendent “object” that she shows as revealing itself within the dialectic we analyzed in earlier chapters. Dickinson regards self-limitation as another activity of soul that suggests soul’s agency in a new way; and beyond this there exists an even more self-formative agency that perhaps encompasses all of the faculties of the subject, including perception, consciousness, mind, and soul in statements of renunciation. In renouncing its own preferences and limiting or adjusting its field of negotiation, subjectivity completes and recapitulates what were at earlier stages painful, apparently passive moments of absence, blankness, and blindness—but in a new mode. Renunciation, then, is a process by which cognitive perception or judgment, an estimation of the relative value or size of things (especially the natural or human in light of the divine) is purified; it is also, as I argued, a “putting out of Eyes,” the
sacrificing of material vision altogether. To put out one’s eyes is to sacrifice that which one normally stakes one’s identity upon—the certainty of one’s own perceptions/cognitions/judgments. Thus, renunciation as marked in this poem is also self-renunciation—the putting out of the “I” as well as the “eye.

In this light, the final part of the chapter identified these self-defining acts of soul as at least cohering with Hegel’s development of “Spirit,” namely, the more-than-individual, the universal, the we-as-community as set over against the other pole of a particular soul, and at the same time with the via negativa and modes of apophasis that are related to the traditions associated with Christian mysticism and Neoplatonism. But what I suggested in my reading of poems 945 and 1651 is that the mutuality that exists between the germinal soul and spirit itself is absolutely essential in the development of the subject as it moves into spirit (or spirit into it). The Mind or the Soul is not merely a passive, receptive instrument, but something in the subject must be willing to seek and recognize what is already within it as a germinal aspect in order to “convey it Home.” And in poem 1651, in particular, I showed how this mutuality becomes representative of language or poetry itself: where language is the unpurified vessel into which pure Spirit descends into the subject—at the “consent of language” and subject. The inadequacy of language to contain or express the fullness of the Word is hinted at here, in spite of the receiver’s love of the logos; only if language can “breathe” as “distinctly” as the Word itself, or as pure Spirit can (as spirit = breath (pneuma)), is an unsettled eternity assured or in question (“Has not the power to die/ Cohesive as the Spirit/ It may expire if He—/ ‘Made Flesh and dwelt among us’/ Could condescension be/ Like this consent of Language/ This loved Philology?”).
In sum, therefore, subjectivity, in Dickinson, is certainly more comprehensive, yet open-ended and fluid than the traditional terms “soul,” “mind,” and “spirit,” even though the Hegelian sense of Spirit, Infinite and Universal, is intimated by Dickinson’s poetry—not only in the use of the term “Spirit,” but also in the “we” or, again, in the inter-subjective dialectic of “me,” “myself,” “I.” But Dickinson, unlike Hegel, never loses sight of the piercing drama of vulnerable individual subjectivity and the problem or central question of Infinite Finitude for the “I” that the “I” must extinguish. The great confident brushstrokes of evolving Spirit in its many incarnations in Hegel are not characteristic of the drama and dilemma of evolving subjectivity in Dickinson. In a real sense, therefore, her poetry stands at a pivotal juncture between traditional terms and understandings of selfhood and the emergence of a new modern subjectivity (related to that of Hegel) without belonging exclusively to either traditional or Hegelian models. Earlier features of selfhood such as soul, body, spirit and Hegelian treatments of an individual soul-development into the more-than-individual spirit that is already implicit in soul’s earliest stages are transformed in Dickinson’s phenomenology of subjectivity, where absence, blank, desire, negation, slant, interval, self-limitation, self-renunciation take on a definite Dickinsonian force, no matter how much they may also resonate with the many “nights” of the senses, of soul, or of intellect in the Christian mysticism of St. John of the Cross, for instance.
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